

FROM THE MARGINS

MIGRANT ACADEMICS' NARRATIVES OF PRECARITY



EDITED BY
LADAN RAHBARI AND OLGA BURLYUK

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Ladan Rahbari and Olga Burlyuk (eds), *From the Margins: Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0508>

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<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0508#resources>

Information about any revised edition of this work will be provided at
<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0508>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80511-786-5

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80511-787-2

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80511-788-9

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80511-790-2

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-80511-789-6

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0508

Cover image: Timeless Elegance of Lawang Sewu, photo by Mitchell Soeharsono, February 14, 2025, <https://unsplash.com/photos/a-long-hallway-with-white-walls-and-black-doors-LAJQLDwVRrs>. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

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Introduction

Migrant Academics Narrating Their Precarity: The Exhausting, the Imperative, and the Joyful

Ladan Rahbari and Olga Burlyuk

As we write this introduction in January 2026, we find ourselves reflecting on the context in which this book has been conceived and completed. It feels unfair and impossible to write an introduction to a book on migrant academics' precarity since Israel has demolished all universities in Gaza and many academic journeys and lives there have ended temporarily or definitively. The scholasticide and the systematic massacre and displacement of Palestinians, mostly academics from Gaza, have severely intensified in the last two years, coinciding with the period in which we were finalizing the book and this introduction.

We have also witnessed our students and colleagues in the Netherlands (the country where we, the editors, are based), peacefully protesting the massacre and dehumanization of Palestinians, being beaten on our campuses by security forces called in by our university authorities. In many European and North American countries, including the Netherlands and the United States, we have also seen a sharper turn toward regressive and anti-science governance. Xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric continues to enter mainstream politics and policy and is reflected in the ways non-white bodies are treated as subhuman, inhuman, and even waste.

We, the editors, have also been impacted by ongoing wars and unrest in our own birth countries. From 28 December 2025 until the moment we finalized this introduction, in Iran (Ladan's birth country), large scale anti-regime protests have been going on. Initially, protesting students and academics were violently targeted by the Iranian regime before universities were entirely shutdown. A total communication black-out imposed by the regime to curb protests and hide state violence and brutality from view has slowed down the flow of information. But there are already reports that thousands of protesters, some of whom were students, have been killed.

In Ukraine (Olga's birth country), science and education have been under attack since Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. Hundreds of professors and thousands of students have been killed in battle or in Russia's daily deadly strikes against civilians. On average, a classroom of children is killed or injured weekly. An estimated 4,500 education institutions, including one in five higher education institutions and one in three research facilities, have been damaged or completely destroyed by the war so far. At the time of writing, education and research are severely curtailed or suspended due to country-wide energy blackouts. On the occupied territories, Russia systematically targets Ukrainian professors and educators through coercion, ideological pressure, and violence, while 20,000 children have been kidnapped and placed in Russian foster families and camps for 're-education'.

All these developments carry direct implications for migrant academics like us and the contributors to this book. These are not just distant headlines for us; they shape the very ground on which we, migrant academics, are supposed to stand and cultivate our work. These struggles have gone hand in hand with the repression of academic voices, censorship, and a new wave of crackdowns on academic freedom, also in the West.

We, the editors, are finalizing this collection as we have been experiencing and sometimes mourning all the above, exhausted in ways and to extents we could not imagine. The same applies to the contributors to this book, many of whom live under turbulent conditions. It has been incredibly draining, to say the least, for many of us to continue to do the work we love under these seemingly impossible circumstances. In spite of these circumstances and the exhaustion we feel, and perhaps

precisely because of them, the type of work this book aims to do feels more imperative today than ever. Because we feel the urge to rage against the machine in whatever way we can. This book has been curated in that spirit. It is also in that spirit that we go beyond usual writing practices in academia by sharing emotions, stories, opinions, the unconventional, the poetic, and the unruly.

This book is a continuation of the work we started in our earlier volume, *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe*, and builds on the foundations laid there (Burlyuk and Rahbari, 2023). In the present book, we deliberately push the conversation further. We widen the geographic and geopolitical scope of our collection and reflect on the precarities migrant academics face and the forms of resistance they practice, often from the margins. The imperative to resist was felt not only by us, the editors, but also by many of the contributors to this project, who saw themselves in the narratives of the first book and reached out to us because they, too, wanted to tell their stories.

Between the exhausting and the imperative, the work of curating this book has been tremendously joyful. The joy of building solidarity and friendships across borders and disciplines has been the best part of curating this book. In fact, the very birth of this project happened parallel to the gradual formation of the editors' friendship. It was a true academic 'love story' since we met through our academic writings. We connected over shared frustrations and a strong sense that something had to be done about them. Four years on, and now having co-written, co-edited, and even co-worked at the same research institution (this last one is entirely coincidental), our friendship has grown deeper.

We believe that surviving and thriving in academia is made possible by the joy of building up and maintaining friendships, and bonds of care and love for one another. We have tried to practice that in the process of curating this project. Joy has truly been the binding factor that has made it possible for us, editors, and many if not all contributors to this book, to push through the exhausting and imperative task of writing stories that can evoke unpleasant memories and emotions.

Migrant Academics and Transnational Mobility in the Margins

The focus on migrant academics' narratives has been the core of this project from the very beginning of our journey in 2020, when we met online and began work on our first book. We made the conscious choice *not* to clearly define what constitutes a 'migrant' or a 'migrant experience' to leave a productive space for self-identification. This openness was also an integral part of this book's intellectual and epistemological project, namely a commitment to resisting the epistemic limitations of top-down concepts and classifications. By doing this, we hoped to open a writing space that embraces complexity and welcomes the diverse ways in which our contributors perceive and narrate their own identities and existence.

Although stories in this book are characterized by experiences that share different forms and levels of precarity (a concept we will expand on in the next section), it is important to highlight that migration is, in reality, not experienced in a uniform way. In fact, the experiences of our contributors cover a broad range of migration trajectories and experiences. Some of them are accidental migrants who ended up migrating for reasons beyond their control; labour migrants who moved primarily for financial reasons and (better) work opportunities; migrants who relocated for love, kinship, and romantic reasons; migrants who escaped political persecution or a lack of academic freedom; refugees who fled conflict, war, and socio-political instability in their first or birth country, etc. Stories may also concern one or a combination of these experiences.

For many early career academics without permanent contracts, continuous mobility has become both a survival strategy and a marker of excellence: moving from one temporary position or fellowship to the next in hopes of securing a permanent position, while demonstrating 'international experience' in hiring procedures, promotion, and grant applications. But the idealized expectation of constant movement masks important and impactful inequalities: mobility cannot simply be considered a matter of personal ambition or choice. It depends on a person's passport and the visa regimes associated with that passport. Citizens of a handful of privileged countries can hop borders with ease, whereas scholars from much of Asia, Africa, South America, and the European periphery must navigate different levels of scrutiny and

bureaucracy at every step. This means that precarity, for some academics, starts even before they set foot out of their first/birth country.

In this book, we often use academic ‘migration’ and ‘mobility’ interchangeably when it comes to the experience of our contributors. This should not be understood as an attempt to generalize the same characteristics to all mobilities and is only reflective of the experiences compiled in this book. As our contributors’ perspectives have demonstrated, the overlap between mobility and self-identifying as a migrant is present in many of the narratives. This overlap is important to emphasize, since often a distinction is made between academic mobility, which is typically and sometimes problematically perceived as a uniquely prestigious opportunity, and migration, which comes with legal and social implications and often connotes a greater precarity.

We have also intentionally included diverse groups of academics in this book, spanning across disciplines, career stages, and locations. The book is home to contributions by scholars at different stages of their career, from doctoral candidates to tenured professors. Our contributors’ disciplinary backgrounds broadly encompass the social sciences and humanities, including law, sociology, anthropology, political science/international relations, philosophy and ethics, linguistics, migration, conflict studies, and gender studies. Despite this diversity, the lack of contributors from other fields is noteworthy. Our invitations to colleagues in the natural sciences or STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) did not lead to contributions to this book. This may have to do with the general disciplinary/ontological divide between our fields or the themes, methods, and writing style we adopted and these scholars’ unfamiliarity with our approach; we have not yet solved this puzzle.

Expanding the geographical scope of the first book, which centred on scholars from the Global South and European peripheries who recounted their experiences in continental Europe, this volume draws on contributors from across all five continents. As such, this book contains a more diverse variety of academic systems our authors write from, for, and about. The contributors also identify with different genders and ethnic backgrounds. Gender and sexuality were not sampling criteria in themselves, but the reader will find contributions by cis-gender, queer, gay, and lesbian migrants who also write about the gendered nature of academia in relation to the migrant experience, with topics such as

family life, reproductive challenges, and health struggles.

We have also decided not to use the core/periphery or North/South binaries. In the first book, we had acknowledged the reductionist nature of such binary notions to capture the realities of transnational mobility, but adopted them nonetheless as loose categorizations. In this book, instead, we have adopted a more relational perspective that, while maintaining that there are global patterns to inequalities and geopolitics, considers power relations between regional cores and peripheries too. This approach illustrates that academic power hierarchies are not always binary and not always Eurocentric. By bringing together these varied geographic experiences, we highlight how non-European regional hubs can function as centres (e.g., South Africa, Japan, or Australia in their respective regions), perpetuating dynamics of subjugation that construct other places as their margins. This adds nuance to academic mobility with the insight that movement between non-Western contexts can be just as significant, life-changing, and precarious as moves to Europe or North America.

Precarity, Resilience, and Collective Resistance

Migrant academics are frequently confronted with a rather romanticized image of their mobility. They often hear that they are lucky and privileged to be able to relocate to boost their careers. Or that they have won some type of lottery to find a permanent job. They may also find themselves at the receiving end of envy because their jobs enable them to cross national borders. Migrant scholars are frequently assumed to be cosmopolitan and nomadic, as if international travel always consists of borderless adventures. While we do not deny that there is a certain degree of reality to academics having certain privileges, a majority of our authors' narratives (in the first book, and in this volume) tend to expose how unequal the distribution of that privilege is. It can seem like a truly Sisyphean exercise to build a life in one place, only to have to pack up and leave again for a new start in another country. We have written about the professional, material, social, and mental costs of such 'transnational lives' for migrant academics elsewhere (Rahbari and Burlyuk, 2025).

In this book, therefore, when referring to migration or mobility, we

choose to focus on the stories of precarious, difficult, and challenging mobilities. We use the notion of precarity not as an absolute condition but as a relational one. Rather than insisting that there is a single, definitive, or worse way to experience precariousness or that precarity must impact every aspect of a person's life to be considered valid and worthy of inquiry, we propose that precarity can manifest in specific aspects of life. Experiences such as temporary instability in work or housing can be considered precarity even though they do not impact a person's life the same way citizenship status does.

The stories in this book recount migrant academics' precarity caused by geopolitical disparities between countries and regions or based on gender, race, nationality, and citizenship status, among others. We also argue that precarities do not entirely originate from inside the academy and may sometimes have other origins. Border regimes and the exposure of migrant academics to racist discourses outside the institution, for instance, occur within the realm of academic mobility but are not always, entirely, or directly caused by institutions or interactions inside the academy. But the push for mobility comes from within the academy where we often maintain a façade that mobility is voluntary. Our intention is to *de-romanticize* the discourse around transnational academic mobility and inject a dose of reality into this picture.

Another concept that was key to the first book was 'resilience'. We initially adopted it because it most accurately reflected the way our contributors to that volume adapted to the adverse conditions they were facing. With resilience, we referred to the ability to adapt to, cope with, and recover from hardships caused by structures and systems that one cannot change. Resilience, in this definition, is born out of necessity and thrives under neoliberal imperatives of self-optimization and individual responsibility. As Sarah Bracke states in her article, 'Bouncing Back: Vulnerability and Resistance in Times of Resilience', resilience has friends in high places and is entangled in dispossession. It is both provoked by the conditions it seeks to overcome and perpetuates dispossession by undercutting our ability to imagine alternative worlds and the agency to pursue them (Bracke, 2016). Thus, while resilience is a type of vital 'safety valve' against systemic precarity, it should not be considered an end-goal or a substitute for structural change. Because of this, while several contributions in this book do speak to the concept

of resilience as a coping mechanism, we have decided not to draw on it (alongside precarity) as an organizing concept.

There are many lived, agential forms of resistance to be found in the chapters. One small but noteworthy thread running through many chapters is humour—irony, sarcasm, satire—which can suggest the presence of resilience, if not always agential forms of resistance. Many essays can be characterized as using humour in the face of horror as a form of refusal to be completely defeated. This book is about the spirit of collectively pushing beyond resilience and actively resisting and re-existing in the very structures that make fertile ground for the abuse of power and render certain lives and voices expendable. Our aim has not been to simply ‘call out’ or ‘cancel’ individuals but to transform our very writing into an act of collective resistance. Following Sara Ahmed, we consider this book to be one big collection of ‘complaints’ against the system in which formal complainants get caught between procedural promises and institutional inertia (Ahmed, 2021).

Narratives as Liberatory: Reversing and Reclaiming the Gaze

In this book, we continue to present narrative, autobiographical, and autoethnographic writing as a form of academic inquiry and a political strategy to resist and disrupt the way academic work is expected to be conceived. Our choice to centre autobiographies and storytelling is rooted in our academic commitments to feminist epistemologies, Black feminist scholarship and the counter-narrative tradition within Critical Race Theory (e.g., Delgado, 1989; Williams, 1991; hooks, 1994). In the first book, we already experimented with unconventional academic genres by opting for creative essays and autobiographic pieces. We did that rather timidly, not knowing whether that choice would be academically costly. However, this initial scepticism proved unnecessary, as our contributors as well as readers were very eager to step outside the conventional scholarly patterns.

Stories are forms of knowledge production that are often marginalized or dismissed within mainstream academia as ‘too subjective’, ‘not generalizable’, or even ‘self-indulgent’. We were aware of these critiques and acknowledge that narrative inquiries, like all other forms of research,

are situated. Stories certainly do not aim to produce generalizable findings, although the ‘particular’ can contribute significantly to better understanding the ‘general’. For us, storytelling has not just been a way of illustrating experiences but is a vital mode of theorization. As feminist and decolonial scholars have long argued, stories are theoretically generative, they disrupt the hierarchies between the knower and the known and centre the voice of the knowing subject (González and Sánchez-Lasaballett, 2023). In doing so, stories also open up space for resistance and for exposing inequalities and power imbalances.

We view personal narrative and storytelling as a scholarly, rigorous, and powerful method to interrogate structural issues. As we argued in the first book, telling stories that counter the status quo can be a radical act of decolonizing academic discourse, since they shift the centre of analysis to lived experience, blurring the line between researcher and subject and challenging the expectation of the ‘objective’. In other words, in this book, each author is both the storyteller and the analyst of their own experiences. The narrative approach of this book, therefore, reverses the gaze in a two-fold way: the academic gaze on migrants is reclaimed through migrants taking charge of telling their own stories, and the outward gaze of the researcher is turned inwards by looking at our own narrative as a site of inquiry. This approach creatively and insistently challenges the harsh divisions that are often made between structures and individuals, minds and souls, the objective and the subjective, science and art (Burlyuk and Rahbari, 2023).

We know that writing one’s own story is not always easy. In fact, many of our contributors, even those with abundant experience in qualitative or narrative research and those working in migration studies, found it difficult to turn the gaze toward themselves. There are serious challenges in deciding how much of one’s personal experiences to reveal. Opening up too much can give the author a sense of vulnerability or actually make one vulnerable. The emotional labour involved in autobiographical inquiry and writing can be difficult even for highly experienced scholars. In addition to this, some narratives in this book were particularly painful to write as they tell stories about experiences of rejection, discrimination, or loss. Some authors expressed having had to relive negative emotions and revisit trauma. But, as our contributors told us, those painful recollections sometimes turned into a cathartic or

even empowering exercise of taking ownership of one's narrative. Some contributors described the writing process as therapeutic, helping them make sense of what they had lived through and even find closure on certain episodes of their lives.

Stylistically, the essays in this collection are as diverse as their authors and push the boundaries of conventional academic writing in beautiful ways. We gave contributors a very open assignment: to write a narrative about any aspect of precarity in their academic life, in whatever form or tone they felt conveyed their truth. As a result, in this book, you will encounter different styles of poetry and prose, letter writing and autobiographical narratives that range from an in-depth analysis of singular events to stories of weeks, months, or years of the contributors' lives.

The Stories in This Book and How to Read Them

The book consists of this introductory chapter by us as editors, twenty-one narrative chapters by twenty-two authors, and a concluding chapter by Victoria Reyes, a professor we invited to read the draft manuscript and reflect on it. In terms of the structure of the book, we have decided not to order chapters into pre-defined thematic sections. By doing this, we leave space for the readers to read narratives in diverse ways and sequences and allow for the organizing concepts to emerge from the narratives themselves. With this, we hope that the reader's experience will be intuitively based on the lived experiences and metaphors our authors chose, rather than by the categories we or scholarly literature deem relevant. This means that the chapters are arranged in one possible order among the many alternatives (we have considered more than ten), linked through just one of the many points of dialogue between them. Readers can thus follow the order in the table of contents or start their journey by choosing any chapter from the book and creating their own pathway. More so: inspired by Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1963), which prompts readers to hop around chapters in a nonlinear fashion, we aimed for this book to be a hopscotch collage of narratives. And so, we took upon ourselves the liberty—and the responsibility—to leave editorial suggestions for 'what to read next' at the end of each chapter, connecting the many essays along various (and multiple) axes

and linking to the essays in our first book, too. But let us introduce the chapters briefly, in the order in which they appear in the book.

The book opens with the essay by Diana Zacca Thomaz in Chapter 1, titled ‘Tango Partners: A Migrant Academic’s Fusion of Privilege and Precarity’. In it, she reflects on her experience as a female scholar from Brazil based in Canada, the UK, the USA, and now the Netherlands. Diana writes about how we tend to think of ‘migrant’ and ‘academic’ as opposite categories: one stands for precarity and prejudice, and the other for privilege and prestige. Going over about ten years of her migrant academic journey across five countries and three continents in just a few pages, Diana tries to show that precarity and privilege are not necessarily opponents locked in a duel. Centring on her story of renouncing and then reclaiming the pronunciation of her first name as a (self-)emancipatory act, Diana ponders on the role language, whiteness, border regimes, austerity measures, meritocracy claims, home-making (and un-making), love, and support—and more—play in one’s journey as a migrant academic.

José Gustavo Prieto Muñoz’s essay, titled ‘The Power of Small Talk: Catching up with the Academic World of International Law’, follows in Chapter 2. Revisiting his experience of leaving Ecuador to pursue a PhD in Italy, combined with shorter and numerous academic stays in Ukraine, Germany, and elsewhere in Europe, Gustavo reflects on how everyday informal rules and exchanges with colleagues he describes as having ‘peacock capital’ shape academic life and opportunity. Gustavo argues that what defines the academic ‘global north’ is not only its material wealth but its density of social spaces where such conversations naturally happen. Distance—geographic, linguistic, ethnic, social, financial, cultural...—leads to one’s structural exclusion from such spaces or years of ‘playing catch up’ when such distance happens to be reduced.

Babátúndé Fágbàyíbó’s essay ‘Mallam’s Passport: A Poetic Reflection of an Intra-African Academic Migrant’ in Chapter 3 is made up of six annotated poems that explore the precariousness of being an academic migrant (in the author’s case, a Nigerian academic migrant based in South Africa). These poems are autobiographical not in the sense that they actually happened to the author; more broadly, Babátúndé has used a form of poetic license to not only imagine possibilities and cases, but

also to dramatize some actual events that have been either personally experienced, been heard about from friends and acquaintances who are also migrants like him, or been read about in the media. The poems, whether satirical or nostalgic or else, come accompanied with a playlist—which, in the opinion of the editors, would indeed serve as a good soundtrack for many essays in the book.

In the following Chapter 4, Tereza Hendl's essay titled 'Moving through Power' looks at what it is like to be positioned as an 'Eastern European woman academic' moving via the Netherlands, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, and Germany. Exploring Western dominating power structures, the prejudice maintained within them, and the continuous devaluation of knowledge from Europe's East, the migrant experience is one of concern with what East-West inequalities reveal about those who preserve them. Contrasting the political climate at the time of writing and the academic imperative of producing 'objective' apolitical research, Tereza asks, 'Where shall one go?'

Reflections on academic power hierarchies and political realities continue in Ahmed Abozaid's essay 'From Denial to Shaming: Resentment and Other Stories on Being Critical, Muslim, Person of Colour in Global Academia', which appears in Chapter 5. Writing as an 'Egyptian, Arab, and African (in order)' migrant academic based in the UK and reflecting on gender, race, religion, language, and more, Ahmed attempts to determine the state of denial that precedes complaints about unjust circumstances, believing that some of the complaints generate resistance and some generate sorrow. In this essay, Ahmed primarily thinks about Sara Ahmed's work on complaining.

Written by an anonymous Palestinian researcher, Chapter 6 confronts the dissonance between life as a migrant academic in the Netherlands while unrelenting genocidal violence unfolds in Palestine. In her essay, 'Despotic Devices; Yet Another Form', the author situates her migration not as voluntary mobility but as a form of displacement that is historical, structural, and deeply personal. Recounting stories of mobility permissions, visa applications, and being endlessly questioned, she reveals how her academic existence has become entangled with surveillance regimes and geopolitical constraints. These same regimes bar her access to her homeland in the name of safety. As she is waiting to be permitted to return home, to re-root herself, she reflects on the

coloniality of a border regime that has no understanding of the intricate realities of the Palestinian existence.

In Chapter 7, Aizada Arystanbek continues on the topic of doing (doctoral) research in an alienating environment and examines how the culture of American academia, and specifically US graduate schools, shapes the experiences of migrant scholars from Central Asia, focusing on the tensions between personal grief, political crises, and institutional expectations. Her essay, titled 'Navigating American Academia amidst Global Unrest, or Why We Should Complain More', explores how demands for productivity and expertise can exploit scholars' identities while sidelining their emotional labour, in Aizada's case, during Kazakhstan's Bloody January protests in January 2022 quickly followed by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In Chapter 8, taking the reader three decades back in time, Aida A. Hozic's essay, 'My Disappointing Life' explores disappointments and regrets brought on by decades of professional life in the United States academe: the narrow ideological space, market pressures, continued challenges of immigration policies. Originally from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Aida arrived in the United States to pursue a PhD before the beginning of the Yugoslav wars and soon found herself stateless, without stable income or health insurance and with her (stateless and unemployed) mother to care for. While seemingly settled in a job and a career, the author recognizes her continued and unsettling angst in the face of perpetual wars and disappearing freedoms.

Julio César Díaz Calderón's essay, 'Trauma, Ancestry, and Friendship during Graduate Education and Their Aftermaths' in Chapter 9 is written literally in conversation with the previous author—as a poetic letter to Aida, who is Julio's academic mentor, colleague, and friend. Julio writes from the experience of having arrived in the United States from 'Oaxaca, a periphery of the periphery that Mexico represents in the context of IR' to pursue a PhD in Political Science, 'a discipline dominated by Eurocentric approaches and US-based voices'. In this essay, the author interweaves poetry and narrative to delve into the traumas we carried before entering graduate education as precarious migrant scholars, the ones we accumulated during that time, and those that persist long after we have departed. Trauma is a response to violence that shatters our sense of self, our place in the world, and our understanding of how the

world functions.

Continuing on the theme of trauma and mental health, in Chapter 10, Xin Pan's essay, 'Four Seasons of Being a Migrant Academic' collects and narrates fragments of the experiences of a queer migrant academic from China living in Europe (Belgium and the United Kingdom). The fragments reflect on how the racialized and marginalized body navigates everyday life through all seasons of the year. In doing so, Xin pays tribute to multiplicity and disrupts the linearity: the order of seasons is autumn, summer, winter, spring. By connecting one's memories in the past and happenstances at present, these fragments make the epiphany of one's situating and self-understanding possible. Gender, race, sexuality, nationality, borders, financial, and job insecurity, language, home, and belonging, one's name and more all traverse in a story of hope and loss.

Nur Daut, in Chapter 11, reflects on the profound academic experiences in her home country Malaysia and as a migrant academic in Türkiye and Japan, where she resided at the time of writing following undergraduate studies in the USA and graduate school in the United Kingdom. Her essay titled 'Nami ni noru 波に乗る (Riding the Waves): My Journey as a Migrant Academic' captures the trials and tribulations as well as the joy, passion, and excitement of academia. As her journey unfolds, she realizes that academia presents unique challenges for a foreign female academic like herself. While Xin's essay uses the metaphor of seasons of the year, Nur uses the metaphor of natural phenomena in hers.

Continuing on the subject of being at peace in academia, in Chapter 12, Ila Nagar's 'Lost and Found: On Being an Average Immigrant Academic' speaks about being content with being average in a profession (academia) and in countries (India and the USA) that celebrate excellence; about finding a place to be an average person, an average academic, and an immigrant. Ila believes that her entry into the United States academy as a migrant woman academic from India allowed her to flourish in ways she would not have in her country of origin and acknowledges how mobility has facilitated this state, being average.

Amisah Bakuri, in her essay 'Resilience in Uncertainties: Embracing and Celebrating Black Joy' in Chapter 13, moves the reader from feeling content in academia (in Nur's and Ila's essays) to being joyous. Written as a letter to her younger self and opening and closing with beautiful

poems, this essay is a reflection on the challenges of being a Black migrant academic (specifically, from Ghana based in the Netherlands) and ensuing visa struggles, language barriers, and alienation. The chapter explores resilience as an affective, embodied, and collective practice, deeply rooted in Black joy. Beyond mere survival, resilience and Black joy affirm life, community, beauty, and presence in spaces that challenge one's sense of belonging.

Reda Mahajar's essay, 'A Happy Migrant in Unhappy Times', appears in Chapter 14 and tells a story of parts of Reda's life, including his being born in Syria to refugee parents and being denied multiple US and Canadian student visas despite securing full PhD scholarships. Reda pursued his education through online programs while dodging bombs in Damascus and bureaucratic nightmares in Lebanon, eventually finding refuge and completing his PhD in Brussels. But now, he encounters a new challenge: navigating research funding schemes and attached requirements of 'academic mobility' with a refugee status that renders him rather immobile. His very name a declaration of joy and migrancy, Reda tells his story as one of persisting hope and optimism, with remarkable individuals having helped him navigate extremely hostile systems.

James Burford and Fatima Alhaj Hasan's essay, 'In It Differently, Together: Working through Precarity as a Migrant Supervisor and International Doctoral Student', in Chapter 15 offers a co-authored narrative by a supervisor and his doctoral student, both migrant academics in the UK, reflecting on their personal and professional experiences of academic precarity. Through intertwining life stories, Jamie (a queer academic from Aotearoa/New Zealand) and Fatima (a PhD researcher from Syria) explore how migration, instability, and institutional vulnerability have shaped their individual academic paths and their evolving supervisory relationship. In opening up to the reader—and to each other through the very writing of this essay—the authors ponder on the multifaceted and relational nature of precarity, and the support academics could and should afford each other.

In Chapter 16, Farinaz Basmechi's essay 'Canada: Land of Opportunities for Researchers, But Which Ones?' traces the author's academic journey as an Iranian researcher navigating the intersecting challenges of international mobility, political adversity, and gendered

constraints. From pursuing a first PhD in Sociology in the United States during the Trump Administration to undertaking a second PhD in Feminist and Gender Studies in Canada, the narrative highlights the systemic barriers faced by international scholars. The author reflects on the vital role of feminist solidarity in sustaining hope and resilience throughout this complex and often contradictory pursuit of opportunity.

Franka Vaughan's essay 'G'day Mate! I'm Franka Vaughan, innit? A Mobile Academic's Tales of Visa Woes and Other Misadventures' in Chapter 17 weaves together stories of manoeuvring the terrains of prejudicial immigration systems as a Black migrant academic, narrated with a tinge of cynicism and anger. Originally from Ghana, Franka recounts her experiences of studying and working in the UK and Australia—which included legally changing her name to appear less African on paper—and explores the tension between preparation and unpredictability. She reveals the persistence of the emotional and psychological toll that characterizes border crossings in academia, despite carefully constructed defences against bureaucracy, racism, and systemic discrimination. Franka's pregnancy as an international graduate student in Australia exacerbated all of these further, leaving her 'in a continuous loop of uncertainty and confusion'.

The challenge of becoming a mother while doing a PhD is further explored by Shilpa Reddy in Chapter 18. Titled 'Who Gets to Have a Child in Grad School? Financial Precarity of the Migrant Single Mother', Shilpa's essay focuses on the financial precarity she experienced as a migrant doctoral student in the USA coming from India. A brutally capitalistic country with policies that do not support graduate student parents, a department that does not adequately support international students, an important academic discipline that is universally devalued, a patriarchal society that raises boys to be breadwinners and girls to be homemakers—these all converged to create precarious conditions during a critical phase of her life, becoming a mother.

The theme of academic motherhood continues in Chapter 19, in which the Anonyma ponders the parallels between fertility treatment and academic job hunting. In her essay, titled 'One in Four. Recollections of Years of Infertility and Academic Precarity', the author writes about the emotional and physical landscapes of pursuing pregnancy and seeking a permanent academic position, simultaneously. Both processes are

marked by prolonged uncertainty, intense preparation, and vulnerable waiting periods, culminating more often than not in rejection, whether of the body or of the mind. Drawing from personal experience, the narrative highlights the psychological toll and structural similarities of these two life-defining pursuits.

In Chapter 20, Julia Mourão Permoser's essay 'A Train to Vienna: Temporary Contracts, International Mobility and Academic Life in Austria' muses on how prolonged periods of job insecurity—coupled with family planning and motherhood—has profoundly impacted her professional standing and self-awareness and her mental well-being. The essay offers a personal narrative of growth and resilience within the instability and uncertainty of the Austrian academic system. It explores how structural changes intended to internationalize and modernize academia produced new forms of exclusion and insecurity, particularly for women and migrants. Paradoxically, one could even say absurdly, Julia—who arrived in Austria from Brazil via the United States and speaks seven languages—was not considered internationally mobile as only the time 'abroad (from Austria)' counted as such. The essay concludes with a beautiful poem Julia wrote on a train back from yet another job interview. This poem has served as an inspiration for the essay itself.

In Chapter 21, titled 'From Invalidation to Precarity: A Story of an Upgrade', Nadine Hassouné shares a personal journey with appropriated identity, belonging, and intellect, and the internal battle leading to reclaiming them. It is a journey with multiple scenes of invalidation performed by the 'civilized western' homo sapiens upon the 'uncivilized southern' other. A veiled Muslim woman from Jordan and with academic stops in Switzerland, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Finland, Nadine writes her story with dark humour as an adaptation mechanism and demonstrates how precarity is in fact an upgrade for someone like her. She shows how some positive experiences can and do awaken latent dramas and traumas caused by constant invalidation. Gender, race, religion, borders and visas, name, language—many of the issues raised in other essays in the book come back in Nadine's account, often sarcastically so. While the opening narrative essay by Diana challenged the reader to think of the tensions between precarity and privilege, this closing narrative essay reminds the reader that precarity

can be in fact a step up—from the invalidation that precedes it.

Finally, in a sharp concluding chapter titled ‘Afterword: Fractal Whiteness in a Violent World’, Victoria Reyes offers a reflection on the broader themes of the volume. She proposes reading the essays in the book against the grain, that is, moving from a focus on the obstacles to highlighting what makes immigration processes smooth; an exercise that reveals how Whiteness as property and resource is fractal. Going well beyond tying together the book’s multiple strands, this conclusion ends with a claim that ‘any re-imagining of the academy must rely on abolition’ of the system of violences, however small, including of the demand for academic migrants to translate themselves.

Final Words: Migrant Lives and Hopes Matter

To curate this volume, we deliberately rejected a ‘Call for Papers’ as it did not make sense to invite scholars to ‘pitch us their precarity’ in competition for a spot in the book. Instead, every chapter in this book is by personal invitation. We reached out to scholars whose stories we believed needed to be heard. This approach helped us build an atmosphere of trust that has been indispensable for the curation of this project. In some cases, it also inspired contributors to write about friendship, love, and care within academia as central themes in their narratives.

This process of reaching out to individuals also revealed silences and gaps. Some invitees declined to contribute to this book, either at the beginning or after initially accepting, not because they did not wish to be part of the project, but often because they felt they could not, due to time constraints, emotional toll and capacity, or fears of repercussions. This indicates that even with a spirit of solidarity, some voices stay hard to reach or bring in, and they challenge us to think about how we might bridge that in future work.

We have seen how acts of friendship and solidarity, for instance, in the form of a colleague’s supportive words often make the difference between persistence, through sometimes unspeakable circumstances, and giving up. In the first book, we intended to show that caring collaboration works, and this book has been an attempt to double down on that work. We hope this ethos shines through the pages of this book: that friendship and care are not just tools to network and build better

CVs but constitute radical acts that make our work and lives better.

The cover image we chose for this book (similar to the cover image of our first volume) is intended as a metaphor for all the visible and invisible borders, physical and figurative thresholds and doorsteps, migrants need to cross. Country borders are often the first that come to mind when one hears the word. And indeed, even when the legal ‘right’ to cross a border exists and no physical stops need to be made, crossing is experienced differently by migrants, especially those who are racialized and visibly marked as ‘the other’. For these migrants, as anthropologist Shahram Khosravi (2007) states, the border is written on their skin and carried wherever they go. Invisible borders are not limited to national boundaries but also include academic and disciplinary forms of bordering and gatekeeping. As the multiplicity of borders and frames in the image—and the narratives in this and the previous volume—show, for many of us, transitioning to new countries, universities, and academic systems is not always a one-time phenomenon.

In closing this introductory chapter, we think of Olesya Khromeychuk’s writing ‘On hope and democracy’ (2025) which addresses a legacy of ‘hopeless hope’ and how Ukrainians fight not because they are sure of victory but because they must take whatever chance they’ve got, which rather paradoxically creates hope. ‘It’s hopeless hope but it is mine’, writes Khromeychuk in translating the words of Lesya Ukrainka, a prominent Ukrainian feminist poet from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. Similarly, migrant academics may push on not because they are naive but because through pushing, they carve out chances. Some may find hope by redefining success altogether. That acceptance can bring a measure of peace and hope because you no longer tie your self-worth to the broken system’s rewards. We might tie hope back to friendship and love one last time, as our final word: the love and care shown in this project and between contributors is a reason for hope in academia’s future. It suggests that an academic life with friendship is sustainable and even joyful, while without one it is bleak. Precisely in times such as the moment we are living in, solidarity and telling our stories is crucial, a hopeful act, asserting that our lives, experiences, and hopes matter.

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to our contributors for their bravery and trust, to the readers for their support and empathy. Our gratitude also goes to Luisa Voss for her editorial work on the chapters

of this book. Luisa's collaboration with Ladan was also a great source of inspiration to her. We also acknowledge all the colleagues, friends, partners, children, parents and loved ones who care for us and allow us to care for them in various ways, and to those whose care sometimes remains invisible. It is that care that enables all of us to persist. It is only through that care that we can turn the exhausting and the imperative into the joyful.

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I. Tango Partners: A Migrant Academic's Fusion of Privilege and Precarity

Diana Zacca Thomaz

Good morning, everyone, and welcome to [Course Title]. My name is Diana Zacca Thomaz, and I'll be your instructor this term. Yes, you've heard it right, my name is not pronounced like the English 'Diana'. It's not 'Deanna' either, but more like the Italian 'Gianna' with a slightly nasal first 'a'. Gee-uh-na. I'm from Brazil and that's how we say it there—well, at least in Rio. Don't worry, I promise that my name's pronunciation is one of the most complicated things I'm going to try to teach you this term. I honestly wouldn't mind it if you all called me the English Diana or Deanna, but if my mom is visiting and catches any of you doing that, she'll wag her finger at you saying, 'I didn't name her that!' You've been warned. She's tall.

I'm not being completely honest with my students in this convoluted introduction spiel. My mom's fierce attachment to my name's intended pronunciation is real, but that isn't the whole story. When I first left the sizzling, festive, and fear-soaked streets of Rio for their diametrical opposite in Waterloo, Canada, to do a PhD, I was unsure about how to introduce myself. I'd initially say the English Diana to avoid confusion only to confuse us all because I wouldn't naturally answer to it. I ended up settling on 'Deanna' for the duration of the program. Adding the 'g' and the 'uh' sounds seemed like a sadistic short-circuit to impose on native English speakers. 'Deanna' also allowed me to blend in more seamlessly if my interlocutor didn't know the name's actual spelling.

It didn't immediately beg the indefatigable where-are-you-from conversation starter. After a few years apprenticing the Canadian fine art of reflex apologies, my vowel-adding Brazilian accent was gradually becoming subtle enough that, at first listen, some people couldn't tell I wasn't Canadian.

A new language is like a new sensory space suit you acquire. Made up of multiple invisible layers cultivated over time and the epidermis, this suit modulates how you can express yourself to the world and it transmits to you a different way the world can be expressed. It's a space suit that feels awkward and clunky at first but well-oiled and almost comfortable later. Slowly, the frequent stumbles, trips, and slapstick slips from wearing it give way to not-so-affected struts and even graceful pirouettes. But there's a slight weight to it, always, and therefore always something different about how you move in the language—a mild neuropathic gait, some excessive swing at the hips, an asymmetric sway of the arms—that is perceptible to those who have never experienced the language as a space suit. Once, a Kentuckian friend of a friend, after talking to me for a good ten minutes at a party interrupted me mid-sentence—her generous smile suddenly turned into a frown—to ask,

'Wait a minute, are you... ethnic?'

'What do you mean? Aren't we all?'

'I thought I heard a bit of an accent?'

However well-fitted and worn-out, a space suit never melds with your skin.

A few years and international moves after the PhD in Canada, I finally began introducing myself as Gee-uh-na, to my mom's triumphant pride. 'Eles que lutem', as we say in Brazil. 'Let them struggle'. But this bolder stance came with the acquired privilege and promised security of landing the nearly extinct tenure-track assistant professor job. With the benefit of hindsight, I can now see what diligently tailoring my English space suit for years has allowed me to perform: sounding proficient, professional, professorial, even white. The suit has made me more listenable and comfortable especially for senior faculty in universities of the global north, who have a central voice in hiring committees. A PhD from a North American university also mitigates my 'foreignness', as does my

light skin tone. It's no wonder white or white-passing scholars are still prevalent in most academic fields in North Atlantic academia, including in departments of race and ethnic studies. In the sociology department where I was offered the nearly extinct position in the Netherlands, I am the only faculty member from Latin America, but I don't look or sound like most Latinas. I think that's why I've recently come to cling to the original pronunciation of my name. Now that I've collected plenty of visa stamps and stamps of approval, now that English sometimes passes for my skin, I invoke my mom's ire to signal that yes, in fact, I am 'ethnic'.

An ethnic migrant academic. I became a migrant out of studying migration. But it took me many years after leaving Brazil to realize I had become my subject of study. (Not that I study my own trajectory in a formal way.) For most of my PhD, I thought of myself as a student who happened to be living away from home for a while. It didn't feel like the change was self-disruptive enough to merit the migrant label. Doing my doctoral degree in Canada was a respite. It spared me the trials of being a working-class graduate student in Rio. (Here's a peek at the alleged trials: a four-hour return commute crossing the city in multi-modal, crammed, sweaty, and sexual-harassment-infested public transit to attend a two-hour class in a program that expected me to digest five hundred pages of theory per week and my family to understand that my scholarship was, yes, financially a joke, but so prestigious.) It wasn't too hard for the Ontario government to bait me with a fellowship that allowed me to be a full-time PhD candidate (with some odd jobs on the side) living a five-minute walk away from campus.

A migrant? Nah, I was someone enjoying the life of the mind in a cozy library with a snowy view until I was ready to jetpack myself back to Rio holding the golden tube of a foreign diploma, gently tapping said tube on the heavy wooden doors of a distinguished university, the doors sliding open to reveal an elegant wooden chair that's carved with my full name in Renaissance-style calligraphy beckoning me to sit on its cushion of red velvet, which, by the way, isn't really a fabric that holds well in tropical weather.

Surprisingly, the jetpacking scenario never materialized itself, which forced me to finally come to terms with my migrancy. About halfway through my PhD, a far-right government was elected in Brazil, and it immediately proceeded to wreak havoc on the country's higher education

system, which is sustained by federal funds. For students and scholars in the humanities and social sciences doing work deemed dangerously 'woke', the insult of persecution was added to the generalized injury of decaying campus facilities, lack of job openings, and dwindling scholarships and grant opportunities.

My velvet-padded chair reverie was ablaze. It was transfigured into a fever dream of relentless assaults on knowledge production and democracy. Returning home no longer felt viable if I wanted to pursue the fulfilling academic career I had envisioned for myself. But staying in Canada didn't seem very likely given the country's relatively tight academic job market, which legally must privilege permanent residents and citizens in its hiring processes (I was neither). The fact that I finished my PhD in the cataclysmic pandemic year of 2020, when job openings were few and frozen, just compounded the typical added stress faced by migrant academics applying for jobs: what's at stake is not just your income and possibility of career progression, but also all the connections you cherish to people and place. As a migrant with a temporary status, there's no guarantee you'll get to stay where you've been building a life.

'Migrant' and 'academic' are seemingly in tension. In our collective imagination, one stands for precarity and prejudice and the other for privilege and prestige. When we academics say we study migrants, most of the time we mean marginalized and racialized groups, those about whom society is 'worried': the others, the strangers, those whose mobility is compelled, trepidatious, or outright dangerous (to their own lives) because opposed. If we want to refer to more 'desirable' groups, then their migration must logically be seen as a different social phenomenon altogether—'It's about lifestyle, really'. The poetry of everyday language takes care of conjuring up special terms for this brand of non-migrant migrants, like expats, digital nomads, and jet-setters, just to give you the terms I most love to hate.

Scholars living and working abroad are technically migrants but please, of a 'highly-skilled' sort, ok? The towering piles of books we're presumed to have read overshadow our migrancy. The veneer of intellectual sophistication blind many to the instability, financial hazards, and immigration barriers whose severity fluctuates partly according to the passport carried by the scholar at hand.

In a way, if you've seen one migrant academic, you've seen one migrant

academic. The label technically applies, for example, to EU scholars working within the Schengen area, who enjoy a generous bundle of rights and easy access to 'home'. The stakes are radically different for those carrying passports from the old 'third world', not only because of the limited rights and longer distances generally involved, but also because, for many, their career and life prospects would be dramatically compromised were they compelled to return 'home'—a term deserving multiplied quotation marks for those risking persecution if they were to return.

Over the years, I've experienced a series of what I'd call border hassles that have reminded me that the prestige of the scholar label doesn't protect me from the prejudice attached to the migrant (from the global south) one. I've selected a few snapshots for you: I've been required to register with the UK police so they could allegedly keep a close watch on my suspicious whereabouts; I've felt the palms of my hands sweat in the secondary inspection rooms of American airports multiple times because of some alleged glitch in my file; I've had to renew my visa on a yearly basis (in Canada and the US), each time praying to the border gods that they'd judge my funds sufficient to remain (debatable given my student and postdoc pay stubs); I've been unable to apply for the most prominent fellowships reserved for permanent residents and citizens (in Canada); and, most recently, upon landing the nearly extinct tenure-track position in the Netherlands, I've been sitting through numerous meetings in which we speculate about the potential consequences of a bill that aims to promote a 'balanced' internationalization of Dutch universities—because some people are in favour of a 'wacky' internationalization?—which could mean most courses will be taught in Dutch, a space suit I could not possibly assemble quickly and well enough to teach at this educational level.

Yes, a precarious position, but... 'You are a citizen of the world, Diana', a Congolese research interlocutor I'll call Philippe once pronounced me. We were in São Paulo, and I was telling him that I was wrapping up my fieldwork and would soon have a one-week conference stopover in New Orleans on my way back to Canada. Philippe had been living in a squat in São Paulo with his wife and two young children while strategizing their aspired move to Quebec, which would entail crossing northwards most of the borders of the Americas in the hands of different human smugglers. I had tended to dodge all sorts of cosmopolitan tags thrown

at me, until then.

The border hassles notwithstanding, I've been able to move across borders with relative freedom thanks to the academic trajectory I've pursued, to the many scholarships, fellowships, contracts, and university credentials attached to my visa applications. I don't think there's any justice to be found in this relative freedom. I'm not here celebrating it or thinking that I deserve it and earned it through my efforts in acquiring work skills that are still judged as valuable. That'd be falling for the meritocratic nonsense that normalizes the perilous journeys countless people like Philippe and his family must embark on every day in search of a liveable life. When I mention the freedoms I've enjoyed, I'm not handing out confetti for my samba parade. When I mention the obstacles I've faced, I'm not handing out tissues for my pity ballad either. If anything, I'm inviting a glimpse of the closely embracing tango that precarity and privilege perform on the dance floor of a migrant academic's life.

In between obtaining the PhD in Canada and the assistant professor position in the Netherlands, I spent two and a half years post-docking (a verb I hope will catch on). Around half a year docked in the UK and two in the US. The UK position was supposed to last for three years, but a few months after I had gone through the tremendous trouble of moving there amid pandemic lockdown chaos, the UK agency funding the multi-million pound project I was working for announced there'd be drastic cuts to all projects associated with official development assistance because of the financial burden brought by the pandemic. If it's time to tighten the belts, then let's first punch some extra holes in the belts of those whose waists we've historically contributed to keeping thin, the rationale seemed to go.

For weeks nobody knew exactly how these cuts would impact the project I was working on. In the meantime, my job and job-associated visa—that is, my ability to stay in the country I had just moved to—were on the line, a noise I struggled to sleep through. I couldn't afford to wait and hope that my position would be spared, something I wrongly assumed senior 'citizen academic' colleagues whose jobs and residence statuses were not at risk—and whose discourse was all in favour of supporting scholars from the global south—would immediately understand. So I applied for another postdoc that would slingshoot me back to North America, to that famous concrete jungle island where many a migrant

and many an academic have flocked and docked dreaming of a new beginning. This whole postdoc switcheroo turned out to be a stressful plot twist with an exciting outcome. ‘Plot’ seems fitting here. Living in New York City is a known risk factor for the development of main character syndrome. Predictably, the screenwriter picked a semi-gentrified and semi-basement unit of a Brooklyn brownstone as the setting for my new academic chapter. If you’re trying to keep track of space and time in this storyline, I ping-ponged myself across the North Atlantic Ocean three times (Canada-UK, UK-US, US-Netherlands) in less than three years.

Denouncing the increasing labour precarity of academia is vital. We need portraits of all its indignities to fight for dignity. I don’t mean to romanticize how I’ve spent most of the past ten years of my life barely settling and then resettling in different countries. It has been challenging and costly and, shame of all shames, lonely at times. Starting over again in a new place—building a network of love and support from scratch, wading the bureaucratic mud of taxes and health insurances, even finding your way in the grocery stores of a new country (Where the hell do they hide the popcorn kernels here?)—is exhausting. But that exhaustion, at least for me, coexists with a sense of fortune for having been able to dedicate my working life to my intellectual curiosity and for having my horizons radically expanded along the way. I sound like such a nerd.

Come to think of it, maybe precarity and privilege are not just tango partners. Maybe their bodies fuse in some angles. Maybe there’s some privilege in inhabiting this precarious position. In their different ontologies, Buddhists, stoics, and Judith Butler-ists remind us that our lives are inescapably fragile, interdependent, and vulnerable to the actions of known and unknown people that completely escape our control. I think being an ethnic migrant academic gives me a privileged vantage point into that tenuousness of life, a tacit understanding that we can’t take the ground we stand on for granted, and a deep-seated suspicion of grand narratives of belonging and promises of stability and comfort.

As I write this chapter, I’m completing my first year in Amsterdam. This is the land where I’ve felt most ‘foreign’ so far, partially because I haven’t yet acquired a local space suit—which has become an extra concern thanks to that bill I’ve mentioned. It’s been an intense period of adaptation, of deciphering a new academic culture, of discovering the responsibility and thrill of teaching hundreds of students in big lecture

halls, of biking through the ostensibly endless dark months of a temperate Macondo, of braving an exploitative rental market to secure an apartment whose full conversion into a home takes time and patience and some more parties and plants. To celebrate this first year, my mom is coming for a long visit. She'll fly carrying documents that prove our shared blood and my migrant academic status. Let us pray to the border gods once again for no border hassles. It'll be my mom's first time in Europe. And while I can only hope she'll judge my life in this city to be fabulous enough to justify the long distance between us, one thing I know for sure: she'll love to hear all these non-Brazilians pronouncing my name right.

For more on the tension between privilege and precarity, read Nadine in this volume; and Bojan Savić, "'A Small Plot of New Land at All Times': A Narrative of a Vulnerability Mortified", in Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023), pp. 129–36, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.13>; Dragana Stojmenovska, 'Of Academia, Status, and Knowing Your Place', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 51–60, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.06>; Karolina Kluczevska, 'Academic Mobility the "Other" Way: Embodying Simultaneous Privilege and Precarity', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 117–28, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.12>; and Vera Axyonova, 'A Journey to the "Self": From Precarity as Non-Belonging to the Search for Common Ground', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.01>

For more on the significance of (losing and reclaiming) one's name, read Franka, Nadine, Reda, and Xin in this volume; and Ladan Rahbari, "'Who Deserves a Chair?': Performative Kinship and Microaggressions in the European Academy', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 213–24, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.21> and Olga Burlyuk, 'A Smart Hot Russian Girl from Odessa: When Gender Meets Ethnicity in Academia', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 163–80, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.17>

For more on whiteness, being white-passing and becoming white, read Gustavo, Tereza, and Victoria in this volume; and Apostolos Andrikopoulos, 'Becoming White?', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 105–16, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.11>; Martina Vitáčková, 'The Invisible Migrant. The (Im)Possibility of Getting behind the Iron Curtain of Western Academia as an Eastern European Academic', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 43–50, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.05>; Mihnea Tănăsescu, 'Unlearning', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 21–30, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.03>; Burlyuk, 'A Smart Hot Russian Girl from Odessa'; and Axyonova, 'A Journey to the "Self"'.

For more by scholars from South America, read Gustavo, Julio, and Julia in this volume; and Atamhi Cawayu, 'A Letter to Future Adoptee Researchers: On Being a Researcher of Color in Belgium', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 191–200, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.19>

For more on North American graduate school, read Aizada, Farinaz, Ila, and Shilpa in this volume.

2. The Power of Small Talk: Catching up with the Academic World of International Law

José Gustavo Prieto Muñoz

In December 2012, I left Quito, Ecuador, for Europe to begin my PhD program in Law. Although, I had travelled abroad on many occasions and seen the silhouette of the Ecuadorian mountains from a plane before, this time I somehow understood that I would be gone for a long time, and might never again call the beautiful Andes my home. Indeed, a mix of personal and family decisions led me to embark on this journey to write a doctoral dissertation, intermittently living in three cities: Verona (Italy), Kharkiv (Ukraine), and Heidelberg (Germany). The journey has continued since the defence of my thesis, taking me to other places, with my current station being Ghent (Belgium). The following is a short reflection on my personal PhD trajectory.

In the fall of 2012, I received a full scholarship from the University of Verona to conduct research on international investment arbitration. The opportunity was too tempting to pass up. In Ecuador, the conventional wisdom is that you had to pay a lot of money to get a good education, and yet I was about to travel to a place where I would be funded to study a topic I loved: international disputes over foreign investment. Up until that year, I had studied this topic as ‘a hobby’, even buying books on investment law on Amazon because there were few volumes on the subject in local libraries. The following years would (and continue to) be one of the most stimulating periods of my life. I have had the time to explore many new cities, talk to many interesting people, and get involved in so many different projects. However, as

you might expect, there have also been some difficult moments in this new life.

I could write here about many of these challenges: my burning quest for a sense of belonging, the nearly insurmountable battles with bureaucracy and immigration authorities to get residence permits, or even the confusing weeks I had in Ukraine during the first Russian invasion in 2014. However, I would rather share my reflections on another aspect of my travels in pursuit of a PhD that turned out to be fundamental: the small conversations that took place during my travels, something that is usually called 'networking' in transnational academic circles. In the end, most of our life in academia, from the knowledge generation process, to surviving in an alien environment, starts and ends with the exchange of information that occurs during this small talk.

What makes the most important difference in one's career is precisely this: engaging in small talk with the right people at the right time. The tricky part, of course, is that, *a priori*, one cannot know who is the right person to talk to or what is the right time to do so; one only realizes how important a conversation has been after having it. From small talk one not only learns valuable information about the academic environment but also, and even more importantly, one forges trust with other academics. This trust forms the basis for all future academic endeavours, be it writing a book or a grant proposal.

Since the majority of the physical places where this small talk takes place is in the so-called 'global north', mainly the EU and the United States, it is easy to understand the exclusion of someone coming from a country like Ecuador, where these interactions have literally zero (or close to zero) percent chance of occurring. What makes certain places the 'global north' of academia is not only the financial resources they have, but also the ample social space they create. Spaces in which these small essential informational exchanges can occur on a daily basis. Or, to put it another way, precarity in academia can be measured by the relative lack of opportunities for small talk, the chance to drink a beer or a coffee or take a walk, with the right person at the right time. Below, I further develop this idea, using my own experience to illustrate.

When You Feel Your Network Imploding

When I left Ecuador for Italy at the age of thirty-one, I was perfectly conscious that I was leaving my friends and family behind. What I actually felt when I realized my entire social network had imploded was a completely different thing. I had lost contact not only with my favourite people and colleagues I had collaborated with across my career but also the many people I knew by face—perhaps forgetting their names from brief encounters. Once I decided to embark on a PhD abroad, all of these relationships suddenly vanished. I was in Verona, a charming city, where not only did I know no one, but where no one I knew knew anyone. I had no social point of reference, no one to whom I could direct questions or ask for advice. Of course, I was gradually getting to know new people, but even so, it was difficult to ask someone I had just met to explain the new world I had landed in, especially when it came to the details.

I remember the first meetings and PhD seminars. It didn't take long for me to realize that I was probably the only PhD student from outside the European Union. Most of my colleagues were from Veneto or the surrounding areas. Many questions arose in my mind during those early meetings for the doctoral program, such as the appropriate dress code at the university. As I would find out, academia in Italy, especially in law schools, is very formal and if you show up dressed inappropriately, that could affect how your peers interact with you. Yep, people will talk to you, but if you are not formal enough, they might do so in an awkward way.

In fact, many of the questions I had were about seemingly trivial things: How should I dress for this or that seminar? How should I address the senior professors of the faculty? How should I ask for the floor in a discussion? Should I even ask for the floor in a discussion in the first place? Is it acceptable to enter a conference room a couple minutes after an event has started? Should I use Zotero or Endnote for my references? And even, where should I leave my umbrella on a rainy day? In fact, I would learn that in Europe every country has a slightly different answer to that pesky umbrella question.

I remember once returning to my apartment after a seminar, only to find that I could not close the window of my room. Some houses in

Verona are quite old and have wooden shutters, which I would later discover are designed to be closed only during the extremely hot summer months. That night I simply could not close my window. I fell asleep thinking, 'How am I supposed to write a thesis in an environment where I cannot even control my bedroom window?' I couldn't understand why I was upset with myself. How could I be upset about a window or about trivial things like not knowing where to put an umbrella? Should I even be upset? I was in a unique and lucky position. I had won a scholarship to beautiful Italy, and I was complaining about such nonsense?

Later I understood that it wasn't the umbrella or the window that made me feel uncomfortable. These were the first feelings of loneliness and isolation: not having anyone to ask about such stupid little details, not having anyone to ask for advice about the faculty, the local customs, about how to approach peers and professors, or even whether I was supposed to put a tie on for every minor event at the faculty. As the days went by, I would learn these subtleties. But in those early moments I felt my social network had imploded, and my ability to engage in small talk seemed to have vanished. From then on, I would be completely on my own; that was a new feeling.

That Need to 'Catch Up'

I realized early on that if I wanted to be successful and make the most of this opportunity, I needed to 'catch up'. This meant moving and moving fast. The feeling is hard to describe. I had been a university lecturer back home, and yet here I felt like I was from another dimension. Not only in regard to social relationships, but also within my own field of expertise. I felt this especially during events where speakers mentioned certain cases, authors, and doctrines that I had never heard of before.

It was precisely the fact that my peers found such conversational references *so obvious* that made me feel uncomfortable. Why hadn't I heard of these cases, authors, and concepts before? Was the quality of education in my home country lacking? Or was there less literature on the subject in Spanish than in English? After all, I thought, not all literature on international law would be quickly translated into Spanish. In any case, the reason didn't matter so much at the time; what mattered was that need to 'catch up'. It felt like a football match where the team is

down 0-3 at halftime. That pressing need to change the whole strategy, to come back in the second half, tie the score, and then see what happens if the game goes into overtime. That feeling; that urgency. Why should I give up, I thought.

Years later, I reflected on what my urgent internal call to 'catch up' actually meant, and why I had been so puzzled by it. Well, giving up would have meant just concentrating on finishing my thesis, enjoying a really decent doctoral life in Verona, getting my title, and moving on. Not a bad deal. Yet, to be honest, that felt like a sub-optimal outcome. I didn't want to remain just a receptor of knowledge; I wanted to be actively involved in the entire process of producing ideas. And so, I felt the need to move forward, to engage with those circles where ideas about international law were being produced, and to carve out a space in academia where I could help shape the conversation.

A second reflection led me to wonder: who exactly had I been trying to catch up with? Who was I chasing and ultimately planning to reach? My fellow doctoral students at the University of Verona? The professors and more senior staff? Beyond this, was I hoping to catch up with academics in Italy, in Europe or maybe in the whole world? At the time, I hadn't thought too much about the specifics; I just had a blurry idea in mind that led me to pursue a higher level of engagement so that I could become a meaningful participant in the creation of knowledge in my field.

But You Don't Look Ecuadorian

Since my arrival in Europe, I hear one sentence over and over. When I meet someone for the first time and I introduce myself, mentioning my country of origin, my interlocutors, usually with a smile, say something like: 'But you don't look Ecuadorian'. When I answer that I was born in Ecuador and that my whole family is Ecuadorian, I get a follow-up question: 'But are your ancestors European?'

These remarks refer to the fact that my skin colour is not as dark as prejudice dictates that Ecuadorians must look. Many of the people who make these remarks have never been to Ecuador, which leaves me with more questions: Are my interlocutors somehow specialists in Ecuadorianism? How should you look if you are from Ecuador? Are the

same questions asked of people from other countries in Latin America? And above all, if my appearance is a little 'whiter' than that of some of my compatriots, what does that mean in an academic context? Would I be treated differently if I looked 'more Ecuadorian'?

After a while, I stopped paying too much attention to these questions. After all, people try to be nice the first time they meet. So, the 'You don't look Ecuadorian' might just be an icebreaker equivalent to 'It's sunny outside, eh'.

Non preoccuparti, tu sei straniero

Once, during a meeting in Italy, I heard my colleagues discussing a researcher who had become involved in an internal dispute between two well-known professors. I never understood exactly what had happened, but I could see that part of the problem was that, as a graduate student of one of the professors, this researcher had collaborated very closely with another group. Apparently, this was not the most appropriate thing to do for the group.

As I listened to this interesting conversation between colleagues, I could not help but think how complex internal political issues were within Italian law schools. And this complexity goes beyond the university, extending to courts and public offices. Suddenly a question arose in my mind: in the last months, I had talked and cooperated with many people. What if I had unwittingly worked with someone who it was not 'politically' acceptable to interact with? On the one hand, my supervisors were some of the most easy-going and nicest people I had met since arriving in Europe. So it was hard to believe that they were involved in any internal disputes. On the other hand, I didn't really know much about the minutiae of the legal communities in northern Italy, and from what I heard, academic politics seemed to be a far more complex issue than I had thought. I expressed this concern to the group. One of my friends, who often helped me understand such things, looked at me with her kind smile and tried to reassure me: 'Ah Gustavo, Ma non preoccupati, tu sei straniero' [But don't worry, you are a foreigner]. What did she mean by that? It could mean that I was just passing through and that I would never become part of the faculty because of my status as a *straniero* [foreigner], so it didn't matter what I did. However, that

day I focused on a brighter possibility: for whatever reason, any social restrictions placed on local students in their social interactions did not apply to me. In this way, I felt a certain sense of empowerment; being a foreigner in that context meant that I had much greater freedom to approach whomever I wanted.

Suddenly, this notion encouraged me to reach out to even more people and engage in more activities. I thought if anyone in Europe ever reproached me for collaborating with someone (no one ever did), well, I would smile and say, 'Oh, I'm a foreigner, I just don't understand', and continue along my way.

Would it be different if I were a foreigner from another region? Would I have felt the same empowerment from wearing the 'foreigner' label if I were, say, a woman from a Middle Eastern country? I remember someone even saying to me once, 'you are from Latin America, you are an amigo'. Would I have been treated differently as a woman from Latin America? Would it be different if I 'looked more Ecuadorian'? I really do not know and, at the time, I did not care too much either. I was the *straniero* that needed to catch up by reaching out to people and going to more events.

On Academic Conferences and Peacock Capital

Luckily for me, Verona was in a privileged position as far as train connections were concerned. It was possible to go to many important cities and return the same day. So, even though the PhD program did not require me to attend events outside Verona, I started looking for conferences and workshops first in Northern Italy and then beyond. Interestingly, this had a kind of 'snowball' effect, where most of the people I talked to would mention other interesting places and events, giving me ideas for new trips.

I remember talking to someone at an event in Italy about Austrian experts in international investment law. 'Well, if you read them, why don't you just talk to them? Austria is around the corner, you know', he said. Indeed, Austria was around the corner, and I started looking for opportunities to go there. It still surprises me how many Europeans do not realize what a unique opportunity they have for crossing borders inside the Schengen area. They take their extraordinary mobility for

granted. If you are from Ecuador, you know that almost all countries in the world outside of South America will ask you for a visa. And each application will be a painful bureaucratic experience. I still remember the feeling when I crossed my first European border on the train that was taking me from Verona to Innsbruck. It was so liberating: no controls, no one asking for documents. In only minutes I had arrived in a new country! Soon after, I started to find ways to reach more distant locations, even if I had to use my own savings to stay for a night or two.

It was precisely on one of those trips that I started observing that certain individuals attending such academic gatherings in international law had a really special influence on others, on the conversations taking place at the event, and on the texts produced afterwards. Once, during an event in the outskirts of Vienna, I remember an old gentleman that was kindly participating in discussions. From an outsider's perspective he looked like any other participant at a conference, and his interventions were always productive for the debate. However, what struck me was the reaction that he produced in the people around him. Every time he spoke, it caught everyone's attention in a way that belied their complete admiration. During coffee breaks, it was very difficult to approach him, since there were always many people waiting to exchange a few words with him. He reminded me a lot of a big *peacock* walking around showing off his bright colours and amazing everyone by its presence. I said to myself, 'Oh wow, that individual has a lot of *peacock capital*!'

I am sure colleagues from anthropology have more elaborate vocabulary to describe those manifestations of symbolic recognition, but as a scholar of international investment law, I continue to use the term *peacocks* to describe individuals that possess this superlative degree of academic legitimacy and who influence gatherings and the published texts that eventually follow from them.

At the end of the day, I finally saw this man's name on his name tag. OMG. It was CS! One of the founders of the academic field of international investment law. I had bought some of his books on Amazon years ago when I was in Ecuador. And now, I was sitting close to him. Of course, I soon joined the crowd of admirers at the conference and eventually I managed to exchange a few words with him myself.

He would not be the only academic with 'peacock capital' I would meet. The trips to Austria were only the beginning. Once I was there, I

engaged in yet more ‘small talk’ with people who mentioned yet other unique places and events: ‘Well, if you are into this, you definitely have to go to Geneva’; ‘Well if you are looking into investments and are from Latin America, you **MUST** attend this other event in Paris’; ‘How can you even research investment law if you have never been to this institution in Frankfurt, eh?!’ And so on. All these events and places had websites, and yes, the information was ‘publicly’ available, but in practice there was no way I would have known about their existence or considered them accessible to me if people had not mentioned them to me in these casual conversations.

After a while, some of my colleagues and even my PhD supervisors started to note that it is not possible to go to every event in Europe; it is too expensive and there is just not enough time. I started to hear the phrase ‘one needs to be selective’, over and over. And it was true; common sense tells us that it is more productive to focus on a small number of events each year. However, when you come from a distant country, there is no way of knowing exactly which events are most important. When I arrived in Europe, I had been confused about where to put my umbrella and what clothes to wear, how was I going to know what were the ‘right’ events for my career if I did not expose myself to such a broad array of academic events during those first years of the PhD? So, I followed my instinct and continued to attend events, walking around different cities and, of course, talking to people.

Global Academic Villages and Intellectual Density

The more I went to events and conferences, the more I realized that the community of international law scholars was much smaller than I thought. Even if an event took place in a distant city, I would see the familiar people I had spoken to before. In the same vein, a relatively small number of specific institutions would prominently feature in anecdotes told by my interlocutors. It was as if these were some kind of mystical places in international law academia where personal and professional exchanges were even richer than in the events I was now attending regularly.

I also heard about some places that sounded truly unique: a magical place in the hills of Fiesole, or a global law centre in New York.

There were stories about a house in Cambridge that hosted another famous international law centre, and of course frequent mention of an international public law institute ‘across the Neckar River’ in Germany. ‘Oh, you’ve never been there?’ colleagues would ask.

Arriving in Verona had already seemed like travelling a vast distance. But all of these places, although geographically close, seemed even farther away. It was as if Verona were only an entrance point to another world, made up of global villages where ideas (in international law) were actually developed by communities of knowledge. My instinct told me that I had to see these places with my own eyes and interact with their ‘inhabitants’, whoever they might be. Logically, I could not go to all these places, to all the *global villages*; I needed to choose.

The one that seemed closest was that international law institute ‘on the other side of the Neckar river’ in Germany. I heard things like: ‘You’ll find almost every book on international law there’, ‘They have a strong Latin American Community, you should visit them’. I started applying to any mobility fund I could find and finally, in 2014, I travelled to the city of Heidelberg in Germany, for my first research stay.

During the first few days I was really fascinated by the library. They did have almost every book on international law ever written, including the first editions of many of the texts I was busy with. They had all of Carlos Calvo’s writings from the nineteenth century! Even in Ecuador, I had never seen the entire collection of his texts. But day by day, I realized that the most impressive thing about the place was not the books, but the social interactions that took place with people there. It was not exclusively a German institution; it was a global one. At that time, before Covid restrictions, this place enjoyed a kind of social activity among international law scholars that I had not found in any other place. Professors and senior researchers from all over the world (many with plenty of peacock capital) visited the place, sometimes staying for a few days, and they made themselves available for small talk.

I started talking to a lot of visiting Latin American scholars: judges, professors, lawyers—most of them I didn’t even know before relocating to Europe. It was somehow paradoxical that what were for me the most important conversations about my own region took place far away from my continent, in a small German town. It was as if the distance from my geographical area gave me a different perspective, but above all

the opportunity to talk to people who played an important role in the production of legal thought. I once heard a German professor speak of such places where those interactions occur as ‘spaces of high intellectual density’. I started to call them *global academic villages*.

Since that first remarkable year, I travelled as often as I could to this unique German institute. Although, I eventually visited other global academic villages for short periods, this place in Heidelberg would become my second academic home for years to come.

Trips to Ukraine

My life as a graduate student had an additional component, such that the centre of my life ended up being split across Italy, Germany, and Ukraine. My wife worked at a Ukrainian university during those years. Therefore, I started to constantly travel between Verona, Heidelberg, and the city of Kharkiv in Ukraine. My friends always laughed at my strange ‘commutes’ between these three disparate destinations.

During my time in Ukraine, I began to look for academic events and projects, as I had done inside the EU, and eventually I taught as a guest lecturer. However, the dynamics were different and lacked that flow of people from different places. Most of the events were attended by Ukrainians, and the dominant languages were Ukrainian and Russian. Sometimes I needed an interpreter standing next to me in order to communicate.

But I remember I once had a very uncommunicative interpreter. After I spoke for about a minute, he translated only two or three words. I thought about all that had been lost in translation and realized that no matter how open I might be, the language barrier made any meaningful communication difficult. I also wondered, ‘Isn’t that the case with everything that happens in legal academia? A few ideas are generated in global villages, usually in English, and then fragments end up in textbooks in other languages?’

In any case, my presence alone seemed to intrigue many people in Ukraine. During the Q&A sessions, many of the students’ questions were not about my presentation (or what I was trying to convey), but about my geographic region or my view as an outsider of what was going on in Ukraine.

The visits to Ukraine were a constant reminder that I could not take academic life in Italy or Germany for granted. Although Ukraine was very different and distant from Ecuador, there were similarities: both countries seemed far removed from the global academic villages. In other words, those global villages were not really that global: they did include selected people from around the globe, but they were physical places located in only a few select destinations. An ordinary Ukrainian scholar or an ordinary Ecuadorian scholar had close to zero chance of having a casual conversation with someone with peacock capital in international legal academia. Whether because of the language barrier or the need for a visa to enter certain countries, the life and places I had accessed within the European Union were not easily accessible for many researchers around the world. Every time I went back to the Schengen zone from the Ukrainian universe, I had extra motivation to reach out to more people inside the academic villages.

The Power of Small Talk

Once, while I was in Heidelberg, I had arranged to meet my friends at a local pub to watch a Spanish football league game. One of the things I miss the most from my home country is being able to go to cheer on my favourite football team (Liga de Quito). There is nothing like it. That's why I wouldn't miss any opportunity to watch football, even if it's a European league on TV. Every time I went out with people from the Institute, there was always someone I knew and someone else who was just passing through. That day I met a person I had just seen at the Institute; we were the first two to arrive. Over a few beers and conversation about football, we discussed my research a bit. My companion pointed out a few important cases that I had overlooked.

When my friends arrived a little later, we continued to watch the game, which had already started. Finally, one of them asked me, 'Do you know who you were talking to?' I only remembered his first name, so I just shook my head. He told me his name and his position in an international court. Only then was I able to identify him; it turned out that I had unwittingly been talking to one of the most influential people in a branch of my academic field. While he himself was modest and approachable in conversation, the aura of admiration and recognition

from those around him created a different impression. This reflected the external dimension of what I call 'peacock capital', where social perception and treatment by others play a critical role. I had many other such casual conversations with people whose peacock capital was shaped not only by their personal attitudes but also by the collective recognition of their status. These small talks gave me access information that would have taken me months or years to discover by myself, or maybe I would never have come across it.

And it was not just about the information I received in these brief exchanges; it was also about the questions and comments that challenged and improved my own perceptions of my research. On another occasion, during a coffee break, I chatted with an investment arbitrator who was briefly visiting the Institute in Heidelberg. This was a unique opportunity to interact with an international arbitrator. You don't just bump into one on the street, at least not in Verona, and certainly not in Quito or Kharkiv. But in this kind of global village, one might just show up and be as accessible as any other person.

I asked this expert why, in foreign investment disputes, arbitrators tend to apply the legal principles of certain specific jurisdictions in the global north, such as the United Kingdom or Germany, rather than the legal principles of small countries such as Ecuador in Latin America. He replied: 'You're right, son, and I'm open to new ideas, but tell me, what Latin American legal principles could we use in foreign investment disputes that are distinctly different?'

I responded with some ideas, and we had a nice exchange, but then I realized that many of the ideas I had expressed were things I clearly had in mind that I had never included in any publication. I reflected on this for several days. If I had ideas that had not been developed in the legal literature and were not evident to an arbitrator, this might be the very contribution that was missing from my dissertation. Eventually, I went to work and months later published a paper on the topic. It was something that seemed so obvious later, but it had not been before. Small talk with several people from the international legal community of knowledge, that had taken place at just the right moments in my career, allowed me to find one of the keys to my research.

These days, there are a lot of videos, blog posts, and podcasts in which eminent academics (peacocks) give career advice. Anyone can Google

some general tips for success in academia. Yet, what really makes the difference are the little (informal) conversations about those important details that matter to your research; they allow you to make the small adjustments you need. At the end of the day, a PhD dissertation is just a collection of countless small talks, whose content eventually translates into a series of decisions taken over a long period of time.

PhD Defence in Spring

Finally, in the spring of 2017, I defended my PhD dissertation. It was a unique personal moment that I shared with my family. Could I have gotten this far with my thesis if I had just stayed in a library in Verona? Could I have produced these ideas if I had stayed in Ecuador? I don't know. Maybe not. Maybe I could have come up with other interesting ideas, but not the ones I developed in my texts which were the result of many short conversations.

At the end of that afternoon, after leaving the University of Verona and watching my then toddler take his first steps alone in Piazza Bra, I could only think that I should spend most of my time by his side. If he had been born earlier, I probably wouldn't have had the energy or the desire to move around enjoying all those academic villages and events. It is challenging to migrate, pursue a PhD, and raise a kid at the same time. Now that I have him in my life, I thought, I will have to be much more selective about the places I travel to in the future.

I felt a certain relief because I realized that I no longer had that internal need to catch up. It wasn't only about obtaining a title. To return to the sports analogy, it felt like the score was finally tied; I had finally arrived in Europe and my journey was about to begin.

For more on informal rules and hierarchies, read Nur in this volume; Alexander Strelkov, 'Conversation with San Precario', in Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023), pp. 137–42, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.14>; Ladan Rahbari, "'Who Deserves a Chair?': Performative Kinship and Microaggressions in the European Academy', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 213–24, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.21>; Mihnea Tănăsescu, 'Unlearning', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 21–30, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.03>; and Olga Burlyuk, 'A Smart Hot Russian Girl from Odessa: When Gender Meets Ethnicity in Academia', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 163–80, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.17>

For more on whiteness, being white-passing and becoming white, read Diana, Tereza, and Victoria in this volume; Apostolos Andrikopoulos, 'Becoming White?', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 105–16, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.11>; Martina Vitáčková, 'The Invisible Migrant. The (Im)Possibility of Getting behind the Iron Curtain of Western Academia as an Eastern European Academic', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 43–50, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.05>; Mihnea Tănăsescu, 'Unlearning', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 21–30, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.03>; Burlyuk, 'A Smart Hot Russian Girl from Odessa'; and Vera Axyonova, 'A Journey to the "Self": From Precarity as Non-Belonging to the Search for Common Ground', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.01>

For more on the role of language, read Ahmed, Julio, Nadine, and Victoria in this volume.

For more by scholars from South America, read Diana, Julio, and Julia in this volume; and Atamhi Cawayu, 'A Letter to Future Adoptee Researchers: On Being a Researcher of Color in Belgium', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 191–200, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.19>

3. Mallam's Passport: A Poetic Reflection of an Intra- African Academic Migrant

Babátúndé Fágàyíbó

*We all come from somewhere
We all come from something
Life is always in motion
If Adam's tears touched the earth
Then i guess you're not the first, we're all from
Outta town*

—Joyce Olongo ('Outta Town', 2020)

I moved to South Africa in 2002 as a university student and have remained in academia ever since, moving into a tenured academic position after completing my doctoral degree in law. When I was first approached by the editors of this book collection to contribute a personal essay on my experiences as a Nigerian academic migrant in South Africa, my first reaction was how to fit my experiences (and those of others I know personally or have heard about) into a 3-4,000-word essay. When one of the editors then said that poems were also welcome, I immediately jumped at the idea for two reasons.

The first was one of expediency, given that I already have an unpublished collection of poems on the theme of nostalgia and the idea of defining what 'home' really means. So, I chose six poems from that unpublished anthology to explore the precariousness of being an academic migrant, especially an intra-African academic migrant

whose primary research interest is the process of promoting continental integration in Africa. I must say that this does not mean that these poems are exactly (auto)biographical in the sense that they actually happened to me, but more broadly, I have used a form of poetic license to not only imagine possibilities and instances, but also dramatize some actual events that I have either personally experienced and/or heard about from friends and acquaintances who are also (academic) immigrants like me. The second is based on my professional/research experience. As I mentioned earlier, my research is based on exploring ways of deepening continental integration in Africa, and the idea of free movement of people is one of the central pillars of this engagement. It goes without saying that experiences of xenophobia and Afrophobia are antithetical to this goal, but also contribute to my frustration. Another element of my research is the introduction of extratextual materials such as artworks, music, poetry, etc. into the teaching of international law. In this sense, I firmly believe that artistic reflections open our minds to possibilities and expose blind spots in a way that rigid academic materials can only aspire to.

The choice of 'Mallam's Passport' as the title of this poetic reflection is intentional. According to Hunwick (2005), the mallam refers to 'a Hausa term derived from the Arabic mu'allim, meaning "teacher", formerly used to designate a man who was versed in the Arabic language and Islamic sciences to some extent'. In its secular context, it simply refers to a teacher, which is what I am. The Swahili term for a teacher, 'Mwalimu', also comes from the same Arabic source. The reference to the passport comes from the fact that, as a migrant, I am defined by the passport I carry. It privileges and deprives me at the same time. I have lost count of the number of humiliations I have experienced at airports around the world while traveling on a Nigerian passport. As the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie once aptly put it in one of her interviews: 'I watch people's faces, and the minute I present my green Nigerian passport, something happens. It's a mask of distrust'. I remember on one occasion arriving at OR Tambo Airport in Johannesburg, an immigration officer, after checking my passport, asked me what I was doing in South Africa. I replied that I was living and working there and mentioned that I was teaching at the university. The curt reply was that if my skills were so special, why did I not use them at home instead of

bringing them to South Africa? So 'Mallam's Passport' captures not only my identity, but how I continue to navigate spaces with a predetermined negative weight of assumptions, and even the courtesies one receives for being perceived as an 'intellectual'.

All of the poems included in this reflection are unpublished, with the exceptions of 'Merci, Bismarck' (published in the 2015 *Jalada 02: Afrofuture(s)* online edition) and 'Tailors' (published in *Poetry Potion*). Each of the poems is preceded by a brief summary of its meaning, especially its relevance to the theme of this book.

The first is 'Merci, Bismarck'. This poem is a satirical take on the refusal of African states to commit to the free movement of people across the continent. The reference to Bismarck is historical, as he was the German chancellor who convened the Berlin Conference of 1884/1885, which paved the way for the division of Africa among the colonial powers. The reference to the derogatory South African term for black foreigners, *Kwerekwere*, is also used to show how the unbridled attachment of African states to colonial boundaries contradicts the spirit of unity and closer continental integration:

Merci, Bismarck

'Ich bin ein Berliner'
 we proclaim in deeds.
 Berlin is our root, the motherland (and fatherland!).
 We are the true Berliners
 for the city is the foundation of
 our 'reality'.
 Thank you, Bismarck
 for without your ingenuity,
 we'd not be Africans.
 For without your proactive gesture,
 we'd not understand the art of nationalism.
 Obrigado, Bismarck
 for these frontiers.
 They hurt so much, but we love them.
 They say they are artificial lines
 but we don't care.
 These lines are the guarantors of our (in)sanity.

We need these lines to help keep the other out –
Kwerekweres ... bloody foreigners ...
Yes they are black; yes they claim to be 'Africans',
but that shouldn't be our problem.
They must not despoil the sanctity of these beloved
lines.
We shall continue to stop them—bloody foreigners.
We don't want to offend the gods of Berlin,
who gave you the divine wisdom to create these lines.
They must go back to their own lines.
Oh Bismarck, Merci beaucoup
for without you
French, English, Portuguese ...
would have remained foreign languages.
Now we speak these languages so well.
It does magic to our egos ... it gives us swagger.
Do we care whether or not our ancestors understand
these languages?
NO.
Let them learn it in the land of the dead.
For nothing shall take away these beautiful, sophisticated
lingua francae from our tongues.
Many, many thanks Bismarck
for without your divine logic
our leaders would have created a
United States of Africa (?!).
What an affront to your memory!
Sacrilegious!
Anyway,
you'd be content to know that
they are even more Berliner than the rest of us
since all they do is talk, talk, talk ...
Bismarck,
We shall replace you with our ancestors.
We shall sacrifice goats, cows, chickens ...
we shall pour libation.
We need not erect physical statutes or

name, roads and bridges after you.
 You're already ingrained in our psyche
 For every action against unity is a tribute
 to your legacy.
 Long live Bismarck!

The second poem, 'News', reflects the longing for good news about the socio-political and economic development of the homeland left behind. As the late Nigerian-Canadian academic and public intellectual, Pius Adesanmi, once lamented,

Questions raced through my mind: how has an immanent idea of Nigeria been able to hold me in this vice-grip in some twelve years of academic errantry marked by extended sojourns in France, South Africa, the United States, and Canada? How and why have I remained in the prison-house of homeland and nation in the last twelve years? Could the usual faddish theories about diaspora, home, exile, deracination, and roots that we peddle in the cozy confines of academia explain my addiction to Nigeria? Isn't there something masochistic – some inexplicable desire for self-inflicted pain and injury – in letting this addiction happen to me? Masochism? Yes. Every trip to Nigeria, that centripetal space of virtual nation-being, entails a willing submission of the self to the pain inflicted by the contemplation of the Nigerian tragedy. Every compulsive-obsessive visit to Nigeria is a subjection of one's soul to emotional terrorism. There is something masochistic about ritualizing an act whose consequences are as deleterious as they are predictable. (Adesanmi, 2008)

The flurry of bad news, ranging from insecurity to inflation and other calamities, weighs on the soul. The inability of successive Nigerian governments to realize the economic potential of the country remains worrisome. In this reflective poem, I have tried to emphasise how some of the calamities that have not made the headlines actually define us more than those that have been privileged to appear in bold headlines:

News

At home the sea is in the town ... The sea eats the land at home

—Kofi Awoonor

There's news from
 home. They say the

rainwater, like the deity
of crossroads, has done more

than impregnate the barren
soil. It removed the fences that
has long shielded our
nakedness.

Even the gods in whose
mouths our rotund secrets
are safely kept haven't been
spared—they were all killed.

*(Eyewitnesses say nothing
was spilled).*

Some say that they were
replaced by new Gods that
smell (jasmine scented?)
and look (tall, dark & handsome?)
more virile.

Many still say that when
those that voted with their
feet decide to come back home,
they must first be anointed

with rainwater, so that they
could see & feel what has
changed about home.

If I tell you that this
news from home didn't
even make it to the
back page of any of the
local newspapers, would you
believe me?

This third poem came about as a reflection of the general mood of increasing Afrophobia in South Africa. Sitting in my office one afternoon

around 4:00 p.m., I reflected on my privilege as a university professor in South Africa and imagined the other side of the coin: what if I received an official notice ordering me to leave the country within twenty-four hours? This poem is the result of that reflection:

4:00 P.M

3:50 P.M.: Rainwater drenched, indigo bird
perches on the edge of the half-opened upper
window

distracting the Professor from marking scripts, writing
long research articles (that no one except him and
his pipe-smoking friends will read and have endless
debates over)

he adjusts his sit, positioning it in a
perpendicular angle that affords a proper view
of the helpless bird

could the bird be the bearer of a message (from
home?) or messages (from the Department of Immigration?
from doors that have been permanently shut
by the heart?)?

4:00 P.M.: Bird flies away. Someone slides a newspaper
clipping under the Professor's door.

The headline reads –
THE DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION ORDERS
UNIVERSITIES
TO TERMINATE THE CONTRACTS OF ALL FOREIGN
LECTURERS WITH IMMEDIATE EFFECT.

This fourth poem is a nostalgic view of what home means today. The smell of home is in itself an identity marker, defining spaces, favourite foods, and weather patterns. As one becomes more attuned to the smell of the new 'home' in all its temporal and permanent dimensions, the quest to not forget the olfactory attachments to where one came from fuels the drive to find approximations:

I Smell Home

The harmattan clement that
witnessed the departure from home
softly whistled '*Saudade, Saudade*' as if to
again hint the age-old affliction of
voyage: numbness.

For every inch of sojourn away from
home asks of us what we can't give, but we
dare not choose to look the other way.

Bulging eyes revert to a blind
logic; ears sift messages, only allowing
good news to filter in; feet bristles as if
there's a place to be, to settle in, to end
the circuitous sojourn.

But the smell of home keeps us
alive, even when the nights are plenty,
and days remain wistful and scarce. The
smell of home was all we had, all we shared
with those that embraced us.

Then one day, a little black bird
flew into our room at midnight. We scurried
to avoid it, until something told us to be still.

So we stood still. And it revealed itself as
the carrier of the fractured smell of, from
home. As it squeaked, flapping its tiny wings,
and its feathers rhythmically dropping
on our heads, we were reminded of the journey
between here & home—a tale we've never told
any soul.

The tale begs to be told. We
stuttered and stuttered until our tongues
chose to recede, to settle in our throats.

Our tale remains our tale. It may be told one day,
long after we've gone back home. But for now,

let's talk about the smell of home, that which is
our sustenance.

This fifth poem is based on a real experience. The quiet tailor by the roadside whom I meet every morning on my run through my neighbourhood in Pretoria is Ghanaian. Despite our different positionalities, he in the informal sector and I in the professional sector, we both thread together the realities of home and sojourn:

Tailors

In the mornings,
I run past him. He starts
the day by reading his bible, says
a little prayer and then mends
clothes and shoes. I wave at

him, he briskly waves
back, and continues. I run
past him—away from & towards
home. We've both left homes that
ask of us repatriations for
a new home that asks for
our departure dates. He waves

again, and I return it with a
quick smile, running towards home
to go mend words. My words, like the
clothes he mends, need strong
threads to stick them together. We
are both tailors, trying to mend
our ways back home.

The final poem, which is also the title of this poetic essay, brings together the implicit and explicit (sub)texts of the preceding poems. It reinforces the author Taye Selasi's point about the reality of the multilocality of identity:

We're local where we carry out our rituals and relationships, but how we experience our locality depends in part on our restrictions. By restrictions, I mean, where are you able to live? What passport do you hold? Are you restricted by, say, racism, from feeling fully at home where you live? By civil war, dysfunctional governance, economic inflation, from living in

the locality where you had your rituals as a child? This is the least sexy of the R's, less lyric than rituals and relationships, but the question takes us past 'Where are you now?' to 'Why aren't you there, and why?' Rituals, relationships, restrictions. Take a piece of paper and put those three words on top of three columns, then try to fill those columns as honestly as you can. A very different picture of your life in local context, of your identity as a set of experiences, may emerge (Selasi, 2015).

Mallam's Passport

Take it easy, dear Mallam-in-motion.

If (or when) you finally get to meet fellow travellers, do remember that nothing brings strangers together more than a carefully edited nostalgia of a home that never existed, and may never exist.

Still, memories yearn to be manufactured. Beyond here, what else remains?

Mallam, there is really no destination (not even the numerous visas and stamps in your crumpled passport).

But nonetheless, you must take it easy, very easy but not timidly easy.

There's really nothing much to see except to heed the lesson that motion and movement are in a perpetual state of cold war.

Finally, I would like to share ten songs that I think perfectly soundtrack this brief poetic reflection:

Outta Town - Joyce Olongo
 Ajo yi o - Chief Commander Ebenezer Obey
 Migrant des rêves - Fally Ipupa
 Afrika - Angélique Kidjo
 Easy Motion Tourist - King Sunny Ade
 Calling - Tony Allen ft Mary Lee and Norman Feller
 African Unity - Majek Fashek
 Kwerekwere - Masomphenya ft Anyo Banda
 Africa - Yemi Alade ft Sauti Sol
 Motherland - Sound Sultan ft Ada

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For more on brutal border and visa regimes, read Anonymous, Franka, Julio, Nadine, Reda, and Xin in this volume; and Lydia Namatende-Sakwa, 'Wiping the Smudge off the Window: The Darkest Time as a Student in Europe', in Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023), pp. 183–90, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.18>; Tara Asgarilaleh, 'On Being a "Migrant Academic," Precarious Passports, and Invisible Struggles', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 95–102, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.10>; Vjosa Musliu, 'Have You Ever Heard of British Hospitality? Neither Have I', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 83–94, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.09>

For further poetic engagements with the migrant academic experience, read Amisah, Julio, and Julia in this volume; and Alexander Strelkov, 'Conversation with San Precario', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 137–42, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.14> and Namatende-Sakwa, 'Wiping the Smudge off the Window'.

For more on intra-regional migration, read James, Julio, Nur, and Tereza in this volume.

For more by African scholars, read Amisah and Franka in this volume; and Namatende-Sakwa, 'Wiping the Smudge off the Window' and Norah Kiereri, 'Who Do the Dead Belong to? Considering the (In)Visibility of Death as an Outsider in France', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 33–42, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.04>

4. Moving through Power

Tereza Hendl

Moving and being a migrant for me is not hard in itself. For some reason, I have always felt more comfortable being different and out of place than being assumed to be the same. I like variation, it makes the world more interesting. And the conversations. Having grown up in Prague, in a society that was first under, and then in the long process of recovering from, a Soviet occupation, I also felt that it was important to see the world, especially because my ancestors had to struggle for every instance of travel across an occupied border. I do remember the Soviet occupiers, the revolution and the relief that came with liberation (I wrote about this in more detail in Hendl, 2022). Already as a kid, I understood very well that freedom and mobility were not to be taken for granted. And I do like my freedom. Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of my first university encounters with philosophy—and particularly the senior men who taught it and their patriarchal ideas—motivated me to get a Master's degree in Gender Studies and explore what else I could learn and experience around the world.

I began with a minor in Globalisation and Diversity at the University of Maastricht in 2005, and the scale of prejudice towards East-Central Europe/ans in the Netherlands surprised me. I thought that we shared the same continent, but ended up wondering if people travelled enough, as their ideas on life in countries mere hours away were quite ridiculous, frankly. I also remember multiple classmates asking me about 'the war', to which my startled self kept inquiring if they meant the Second World War, until I realized that students enrolled in European Studies were mistaking the Czech Republic for Chechnya (my utmost solidarity with the Chechens, may they soon also be free). I found the lack of knowledge

of basic European geography nurtured in Europe-related units of study incredibly strange.

My second time was my favourite. Quite boldly, in my early twenties I went the furthest I could probably go: to Aotearoa, also known as New Zealand. Through my interest in the ethical issues of prenatal sex selection based on gender preference, I grew increasingly interested in Bioethics. I just looked at the possibilities for an international exchange program in that field offered via Charles University, my alma mater, found three options in Oceania, and one of them worked out. That was in 2008, and because Indigenous Ethics was a core part of the curriculum at Otago University on Aotearoa's South Island, I had the utmost honour to learn about Māori Bioethics. That journey was quite transformative. I was already lucky to have had classes in Postcolonial Studies back at Charles University in Prague and that helped me to connect the dots and make more sense of the very different context in Aotearoa. The experience of being born on occupied land was certainly relevant and made me more intrigued and careful than many of my classmates, especially the ones from the US, many of whom seemed to have picked the destination as a 'gap year' adventure site rather than a place of study. With my serious topics, I felt like a geek; but being from Prague, I also knew how to party without getting completely trashed, which was a useful skill in the international student collective. I was surrounded by rather thoughtful locals in the small university town of Dunedin (not that many arrogant Pākehā settlers, at least not among students in the Humanities) and they were quite aware of the almost isolated position of the island from the 'rest of the world'. So much so that they often told me upfront that they had little idea where I came from, while showing interest in that place. This was a mostly good experience as it made people express fewer preconceived stereotypes and actually ask me to tell them the things I found important for them to know.

I ended up going back to the same side of the world for my PhD in Philosophy (2011-15), that I did in Sydney and which was quite a different experience. I had visited Sydney and Naarm (the original Indigenous name of Melbourne on the unceded lands of the Kulin Nation) during my time in Aotearoa, but that short trip did not give me a good enough idea of how oppressive so-called Australia was as a settler colonial environment. I also had no clue who Macquarie was, and now

the name of a brutal colonizer is on my PhD diploma from Macquarie University, which does not feel good at all (many lessons learnt). I sincerely hope that the university will answer First Nations' demand for changing the institution's name. One of the first hints that things weren't quite right was the almost aggravated response of multiple white Australian academics when I inquired about possibilities for learning about Indigenous Ethics from the perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts. There was so much less respect for Indigenous anything compared with Aotearoa, and I sincerely hope that things will change for the better. Unfortunately, I am hearing from Māori friends and colleagues that the situation in Aotearoa is currently deteriorating, while Australia hasn't changed that much since I left.

In Australia, I've encountered a lot of othering, especially constant questioning about my accent and rather offensive suggestions on where it supposedly belonged, such as that it must be Russian. I ended up giving a lot of exhausting mini-lectures on the major difference between the occupiers and the occupied, including the very significant distinction between the so-called 'being part of' the Soviet 'Union' and being occupied by it and the harms and injustice done to those invaded by the Soviet colonial project (Kassymbekova and Chokobaeva, 2023), while facing a lot of epistemic injustice, denial and gaslighting—especially from Australian leftists. Like most migrants, I was also told by more than enough white right-wing Australians to go back to where I came from in moments when I critically reflected on the dominant local status quo, especially the colonial nature of it all. It was a complex experience, but over the almost decade I had spent on the continent (I completed two postdocs after my PhD), I did end up finding a diverse group of people who were similarly politically engaged. Some of them were in academia and many more were outside of it, and I appreciate all of them greatly—the more so, the more their dissenting voices are sorely needed.

From Australia I made a big move back to Europe for a generously long postdoc of six years. Everyone around me was frantically moving through one-to-two year-long projects, and I valued the opportunity to work on one research topic—digital health from the perspective of justice—for a more significant portion of time. The arrival in Germany shocked me though. In many ways, it felt as if nothing had changed since the 90s. Definitely the attitudes towards Europe's East were hard to

believe and very concerning. I ended up reflecting on how paradoxical it was that so much of the West has presented itself as gender progressive and yet right within it, non-Western women faced a level of stereotyping, exploitation and arrogance that was beyond striking. If you wonder what this looks like in academia, watch out at conferences for the intersection of Westsplainning and mansplainning to women from Europe's East, who continue to be denied in our capacity as knowers and experts—but sadly, often also by many Western women, including feminists. For those who are interested to look deeper into these persistent issues, you are very welcome to read our in-depth analysis of Westsplainning and epistemic imperialism in dominant mainstream and feminist debates on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, that is a result of an epistemically reparative transregional collaboration among scholars from Europe's East and Central Asia (Hendl et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, the struggles of migrant scholars are plenty. Moving around the world as an 'Eastern European' researcher and academic means being endemically underestimated, heavily stereotyped, commonly inferiorized, automatically assumed to be majorly unknowing and—almost by default—out of touch with the world, chronically patronized and, as a woman, massively over-sexualized. It means that one's skills, knowledge, and intelligence will be doubted, belittled and offended almost every step of the way. It also means that one will be expected to be deeply grateful for the sole opportunity to be 'included' near anywhere, even and often especially at times when this means the 'opportunity' to be othered, degraded, underpaid, and exploited in fundamentally unequal, precarious and too often conventionally uninventive neoliberal academia (Hendl and Nachescu, 2023). Further, one is expected to stay silent about all of this or else they might be punished.

Among the things that stand out about German academia within the broader Western context is that it often has a much more favourable view of itself than how it is seen by the world from the outside and by migrant academics from the inside. Those who are privileged within and fond of the German academic system (read: mostly white West-German academics) tend to think that it is academically outstanding and highly regarded, a belief also reinforced by the steady inflow of migrant academics. However, from frank conversations with academic migrants, it appears that they do not come to Germany because German

academia is so welcoming, supportive of critically reflective research, and innovative, but rather because it is comparatively well-funded (how has the German state and its institutions historically accumulated wealth and resources and why it so heavily invested in soft power is a discussion that most local universities are still not ready for). Meanwhile, in my experience, very few migrant academics harbour a high impression of the German system. On the contrary, they experience it as hierarchical, shaped by a systematic abuse of power and a chilling scale of impunity, and deeply, unreflectively racist. Within its structural and institutional dimensions (that are commonly denied), the inter-personal racism is predominantly of the cold supremacist civilizational kind, which asserts the white German order and intellect above that of the 'less significant' Other, disturbingly echoing the history of German empires and their colonial violence from genocide in Namibia, across extermination Nazi camps in occupied Europe's East and onward to today's events. Within this legacy, the Other shall be civilized or perhaps (made to) perish. Or maybe they will be passively theorized from the sole force of the superior German intellect. Such as when a celebrated German philosopher and former member of Hitlerjugend will take it upon himself to ponder the Russian invasion of Ukraine without showing concern for the thoughts of any Ukrainian people on the occupation of their own country (see Habermas 2022, and read his words contextualised by observations offered by Tooze 2017), while many younger German scholars will not even notice what is missing or see any issues with the disregard (startling, given the scale of German crimes in Ukraine in WWII...). The lived and scholarly perspectives of the (de)occupied in Europe's East are simply not that worth familiarizing with in the dominant German (and much of Western) imagination.

How can the Other exist in a hierarchical space that has never truly decolonized itself? In full honesty, most conveniently, by becoming rather insular and living in a bubble. The sad reality is that integration into a hostile, stereotyping, and subjugating context does not benefit one's well-being. And indeed, as a descendant of Czechs from once Nazi-occupied Sudetenland, one finds far more room to thrive outside white Germanness than within its ongoing performances of racialized superiority. This is also why many of us migrants prefer conversations in English instead of the strikingly frequent instances of othering and

patronizing in German conversations. In particular, the quite compulsive need to discipline, instruct, condescend and speak down to the Other in both lay and academic German spaces is a remarkable and rather disturbing experience. One wonders where the need comes from and why it is so hard to overcome.

Indeed, before I started my work in Germany, I made a stop at a Swiss research centre for a short fellowship. There, a visiting German professor jokingly told me that when I begin my job, I should do a little experiment and speak to my colleagues in English and then in German with 'my accent' and see how differently they will treat me. I was stunned that he was so explicit about the common practice of discrimination and yet saw it as a joke and not a major problem that he—as an extremely well-connected professor with a lot of power—should do something about. He also asked me if I really thought that there would ever be a future for me in the country. Back then, I was genuinely puzzled by the question more than anything as I did not consider Germany a place to stay. And certainly, my concerns about the environment have been growing steadily the more far right German society has been heading.

I am writing at a point past state elections in 2024, in which the constituents of the German state of Thuringia elected the leader of the far right AfD party (in full, rather euphemistically and ahistorically called the 'Alternative for Germany'), who has said that Germans should be more proud of their Nazi 'past.' As a descendant of people who live despite of the efforts of Nazi Germans, I observe the far right revival in German society with horror and growing alienation. Sometimes, I get to give talks about my latest research on the intertwined legacy of German and Russian imperialisms and their detrimental effects on the health and well-being in Europe's East, mostly at events organized by fellow migrant academics. Since I have moved beyond sole focus on imperial Russian aggression and began speaking about the scale of destruction and cross-generational trauma caused by German imperialism, it dawned on me just how much Germans are not used to hearing critiques of their past and present from the perspectives of critical thinkers from de-occupied societies of Europe's East. When I speak, I often experience white German academics looking at me with openly angry, hostile and—not uncommonly—rather unrestrained hateful expressions. How dare I, their imagined *Untermensch*, speak like this when I should be learning

from Germans how to think and be grateful for the opportunity.

Here in Germany, like in other West-European countries, discussions about Europe are mostly held in ways that act as if Europe's East was no site of knowledge production worth familiarizing with. Almost nobody knows any scholars from the Eastern half of Europe, even while it is right next door. Certainly near no East-European philosophers, and definitely zero East-European women philosophers, while we obviously exist. This is also the context in which I was told 'but it should have some quality' when I suggested that an edited collection might also want to integrate some scholarship from Europe's East. The scale of disregard and continuous supremacism towards 'Eastern European' thought and its authors are then particularly visibly demonstrated in debates that theorize Ukraine without Ukrainian scholars (for critiques of this hegemonic contemplation practice, see Konarzewska, 2023). These debates illustrate the extent to which German society and its academic system never de-imperialized themselves and continue with the othering of their desired Others. But who am I to speak on the subject; Aryan experts will certainly know better.

As a migrant academic from a population harmed by German Nazism, I regularly ask myself where the line is at which one shall leave Germany behind. I ask this question especially intensely as my partner is from Syria. Witnessing the rise of anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, and anti-Palestinian racism in Germany, escalating alongside the onslaught on Gaza by the German-allied Israeli state, I deeply worry about the safety of many downwardly racialized and stigmatized groups of people in the country, including the closest person I share my life with. The bigger question is: where shall we go? Where are the places where both of us could thrive? And where is the place where I can do contemporary academic work in a world that produces moral and political philosophers but prefers us to write abstract work from disaffected privileged positionalities and avoid being 'too political'?

In a European research infrastructure that does not value or sufficiently fund academic institutions and research in Europe's East, the West remains the primary benefactor of research funding and East-to-West brain drain. Simultaneously, grant and job applications in the West are commonly reviewed by Western scholars who have been embedded within the very academic structures that have systematically devalued

and epistemically marginalized the scholarship and perspectives of researchers from Europe's East and beyond. What chances does one have, when their work challenges the ongoing legacy of Western research and its stereotypical framing of the Eastern half of Europe and the epistemic marginalization of its scholars? The more I ask these questions, the more I realize the extent to which academia and its knowledge production are about power: the power to monopolise expertise, and control the narrative, who can tell it and under which conditions. The answers to the burning questions thus lie predominantly with those who do hold relative power in the system and depend on whether they want to work towards a more equitable academia. An academia that will embrace and employ under-represented scholars, bringing a broader range of so far under-valued, excluded, and critical perspectives. Can there be an academic system genuinely supportive of (self) reflective, complex, unsettling, anti-oppressive, and socially transformative work? I could ponder on the possibilities, but I think that to get closer to change, we will all need to do our part, including by refusing to accept the unequal order from thus far marginalized positions.

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5. From Denial to Shaming: Resentment and Other Stories on Being Critical, Muslim, Person of Colour in Global Academia

Ahmed Abozaid

Every one of us is writing from a traumatic experience ya Abozaid

—from a conversation with Islam Melba (Film director, critic, and a friend)

Borderlands of Deniability: From the Personal to the Epistemic, and the Other Way Around

I remember during one of the episodes of despair and dark moments that I experienced during the past few years, when my partner—a generously considerate and caring person—was trying to condole and relieve me of my sadness, and kept asking me, ‘Ahmed, what exactly are you feeling? What makes you feel in such a bad state?’ This was the first time that I gathered up my courage and tried to articulate and express my feelings and emotions to her in English (something I struggle with still, since I have been denied the right to speak in my own language, Arabic, in the West). I don’t like expressing my feelings in this odious, dry, and mechanical language. I said: ‘Dasha, I feel resentment’. In dictionaries, resentment refers to ‘a feeling of angry displeasure at something regarded as a wrong, insult, or injury’. Later, I found a more accurate description of what I was feeling, which was something I had

read by Audre Lorde when she was describing the feeling of silence and silencing to her daughter:

[It is] The tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempted to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence? And of course, I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger.

—Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (2017, p. 41)

For me, this kind of writing is a kind of healing, moving on, forgiving, as well as complaining (cf. Simone, 1968; Mernissi, 1994; Negm, 2022). It is the complete opposite of silence, the silence that Gloria Anzaldúa once described as the silence that buries us (*el silencio nos sepulta*). Some readers may find this writing important or consider it an attempt to understand the dynamics and mechanisms of epistemic and professional exclusion and injustice against those who are labelled as ‘different’ or ‘not like us’ (Anzaldúa, 1987). I do not ask anyone for belief, sympathy, or denial. In fact, some people might blame me and accuse me of being the reason I got into all these problems (Yes, you are a troublemaker, Ahmed); others may accuse me of victimizing myself and looking for sympathy, or looking for a way out to justify my failure (the everyone hates me paradox). Perhaps, who knows? I am not here to argue or to ‘deny’ any of these interpretations. However, I do believe that the mere existence and publication of such ‘testimonies’ and ‘confessions’ is as far as one can go towards disrupting the structures and institutions of exclusion, injustice, and denial that are practised against us (hooks, 1994).

I define my identity as Egyptian, Arab, and African (in order). I was born and lived for more than twenty years in an isolated, marginalized, and impoverished region in southern Egypt (Al-Sa’id/Upper Egypt). I am a Sunni Muslim and a heterosexual. I studied until my postgraduate degree in political science at Egyptian public universities. However, this degree did not significantly enhance my knowledge of English. I have been self-taught in English, mainly through reading and practising every day with fellow immigrants, mostly from Southwest and subcontinental Indian communities in Dubai, where I worked and lived for a decade or so. In the West, I have been defined as follows: a person of colour or a brown Muslim, a Middle Eastern male, and a fixed-term lecturer

specializing in Middle Eastern studies (which is not true). Sometimes I was defined as masculine and homophobic (since I am an Arab), secretly disrespecting women and claiming to be a feminist in public, which puts me in a position of unjustified defensiveness and disagreement with many white women, and some of my feminist friends, because of these (mis)perceptions and this (mis)representation.

Recently, a dear friend drew my attention to another dimension of the Western definition of me as a 'danger and a source of threat to white males'. I was surprised and asked her to elaborate, and she explained by saying: 'Ahmed, if you were a brown Muslim woman, white men and women would rush to save you [the narrative of 'Muslim women need to be saved', of the masculinity and misogyny of Muslim men], and you would get a permanent job with ease. But you are a Middle Eastern Muslim man, who is professionally accomplished, and proud of himself to an alarming extent that makes other males feel intimidated. And that makes them antagonistic towards you, seeing you immediately as a threat'. She kept going, and my jaw dropped wide open, 'They see you and secretly say, "You are here to fuck our girls and steal our jobs"'.

I was aware of—and kind of prepared for—the many battles and injustices I had been exposed to throughout my academic career (which does not mean that I agreed with or was reconciled with the idea itself). Yet, I was not ready, accepting of, or reconciled to the idea of being a party to a 'sword fight' where 'phallocentrism' and 'androcentrism' are the core of debate, disagreement, and conflict in my life. This reminds me of an accident that happened to me during my PhD, when a white lecturer (mis)used his position and power to insult me and make my life extremely difficult because of his wife (also a white lecturer, both of them being graduates of an exclusive and elite university, working together after their PhDs at the same department, and having a conflict of interest), who for some reasons didn't like me. Perhaps it was because I once followed a different method of marking students' essays that conflicted with what she wanted or expected (I am not sure). So, she complained to 'her husband' (at that time, we as PhD students did not know that they were a couple), who coincidentally was the modules convener who evaluated our performance as graduate teaching assistants. He did everything in his power to make my life a living hell. He insisted on mentioning all his ridiculous and wrong remarks

without bothering to ask for clarification or fact-checking with me or with the students, at least to ascertain the extent of my negligence or non-compliance with the standards applied at the university. To give you a glimpse of this discriminatory and biased treatment, 'the husband' said in the teaching evaluation report, 'I arrived at the class and he was not there', although my bag, jacket, and PowerPoint were on screen, which meant that I was there before he (and the students) arrived. He complained that 'he interrupts the students, and they interrupt him', without bothering to ask about group dynamics within the classroom. He insisted on transferring me to the University's English learning centre because I am not proficient in English, despite my having received no complaint (formal or informal) from a single student during the three years of teaching at the school. His attitude reminds me of what Gloria Anzaldúa once called 'Linguistic Terrorism', whereby I have been denied and discriminated against: 'because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally, and linguistically *somos huérfanos*—we speak an orphan tongue' (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 58). Finally, he insisted that I be re-evaluated in an interview with the head of the school and the teaching director.

All these (unjustified and incomprehensible) escalations and actions raised the suspicions of my supervisor (as she told me herself once at her house), a person known to be strict but objective most of the time. Likewise, the head of the school indicated to me that if I had a complaint or a feeling that I was being subjected to discriminatory treatment or hidden racism, and wanted to tell her, she was willing to listen to my complaint. However, I refused to squash myself into these boxes by turning myself into a victim, giving this racist person a feeling of victory, or making me feel inferior, or diminishing my sense of self and having doubts about my merits, or any of the other feelings that Olga Burlyuk once described as 'the embodied experience of coloniality': that is, 'feel[ing] lesser and inferior by default, regardless of whether [one] is treated as such' (Burlyuk, 2021, 137, quoted from Tsymbalyuk, 2023). More importantly, I was afraid that my mother (my favourite goddess and moral compass) would be disappointed in me, if she found out that I had turned into a person whom she had worked her whole life to prevent me from being: A Victim.

Later, it came to my knowledge that there were other colleagues (of

colour) who were subjected to the same discriminatory treatment, and that ‘the husband’ was the reason why I was not appointed ‘head tutor’ despite the approval of the rest of the staff. Moreover, it came to my knowledge that ‘the wife’ was the reason that I lost a job opportunity at a nearby university, for she attacked and discouraged my nomination for the position.

Overall, these two identities (being a Middle Eastern Muslim man) intersect (and diverge further) within me. However, both definitions shared the feature that they accelerated my suffering and feelings of injustice, exclusion, resentment, discrimination, and other forms of distress, trauma, and grievance throughout my life. All these preconceived presumptions and biases about ‘who I am’ and where I come from, what I do, and other conventional biases and (mis) representations about the heterosexual, Brown, angry, Arab, Muslim man, and blah blah blah, imprison me (and continue to imprison me, now and in the future) and squash me in boxes of apprehension and suspicion. In turn, this made me anchor my academic work—whether publishing, teaching, engagement, etc.—around reflexivity, specifically about so-called autobiographical writings. Thanks to my partner’s encouragement and our long, perpetual, and never-ending conversations, and inspired by her work, I began to think deeply and reflectively about the crucial impact of experiences of suffering, distress, difficulties, and failure which I have gone through throughout my life, in shaping and refining my identity and knowledge.

On Resentment and Other Shit

Beirut/Southampton: May–November 2023

I got my first (non-tenure track) academic job in the UK as a teaching fellow in international security while I was working on the corrections following my PhD viva. The first year of the job was just excellent by all standards. I did not suffer—perhaps for the first time in a long time—from denial or resentment. Nevertheless, it seems that I was delusional, or a dreamer. As soon as the first year passed, the discourses and practices of denial were reinstated. I was not recognized as a political scientist because I mainly work in a very peripheral sub-field of political science

(i.e., political theory). Also, I am almost the only person of colour in the department (bearing in mind that the vast majority of students in the department are international students), and one of three to five members (and the only one on a fixed-term contract) working in international relations and security studies, in a department full of specialists in public policy and British politics specifically. So, I was almost invisible; a ghost. I was not invited to share my work or participate in the weekly seminars (even though I asked to do so at least twice). The only time I presented my work, it was with the Faculty of Law and Constitutional Law Centre, which I am not affiliated with. However, I did not worry about such small and insignificant problems.

It happened that a new postdoc colleague joined us in the office (which I shared with three other colleagues). We were squashed into one office as if we were doctoral students, not faculty members, even though there are several empty offices with dusty shelves in them, because permanent faculty members (who do not have to be on campus at all as is required of us, particularly the junior and non-permanent members) do not like to share their spaces with others. The new colleague was from a country in the Global South. She seemed nice, funny, and had good vibes. Shortly, we became friends. One day, while we were having lunch at the office, she asked me: 'Ahmed, what is your field of specialization or what are you working on?' When I told her, 'I work on political theory', she asked again: 'What area exactly does your research focus on?' I said again, 'I work in political theory, not area study'. She said: 'So you don't specialize in the Middle East?' I told her, yes, I work on the Middle East, but also I work on Europe, Africa, Southwest Asia, and South America. I work on theories of international relations in general. She seemed surprised and unconvinced. We changed the topic and talked about her work.

Frankly, I did not look at my friend's question with hostility, nor did I consider it another form of denial. Yet, I also didn't completely dismiss it. Her question was not new to my ears. In fact, this is strange and has always bothered me throughout my PhD years and aftermath: why do so many people in academia refuse to accept or acknowledge the fact that I work on political theory? Why this presupposition and inevitable limitation of my abilities that 'as long as I am from the Middle East, I must and inevitably work on studying the Middle East'? This logic is

always used in conjunction with internalizing and implicitly accepting the claim that only white men and women have the exclusive right to be 'political theorists'. They are the only scholars who have complete freedom to study and teach any area of the world they choose or feel a desire to study, without engaging in fierce and stressful battles to justify their privileges and entitlements—even if most of them have neither studied these regions in a specialized manner, nor learned their languages, history, and culture, nor became familiar with the people's suffering and struggles.

A few months before this incident (and afterwards), I travelled to participate in a conference on the Arab World. I participated in a panel that I had previously proposed and presented at the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) conference (in Scotland in 2021) on 'Knowledge Production in/on the Arabic-Speaking World'. The first time we had the panel in Britain, the discussion was excellent and very engaging, as we (the speakers) insisted on speaking Arabic, not relying on Eurocentric and Western theories in studying the region, and observing other axioms of the now-known decolonial tendency. In contrast, when we presented in Beirut, most of the questions directed to us denounced our neglect of Western theories and Eurocentric approaches, to the extent that we looked at each other and thought that European methodology had become an outcast, deprived of representation. Moreover, some 'professors' spoke about 'Methodological faults resulting from our ideological exclusion of Western approaches in studying the region'. A professor, who I know was exposed to systematic racism when he was in England because he is black, told me that my criticism was 'ideological and demagogic' and not epistemic. The Arab professors (who were educated in the West and earned their PhDs in the 1980s and 1990s) denounced us and denied our right to produce local knowledge on the one hand; while on the other hand, they embraced and inherited the Eurocentric, orientalist, racist, exclusive, and securitized approaches to studying the region. What was worse was that they did this consciously and deliberately. Hypocritically, these professors are the ones who fill newspapers and social media with their complaints and resentment of the West's racism and the exclusion of local 'experts', while they did nothing but reproduce and internalize the Eurocentric approach that excludes and denies local scholars' rights and restricts their capabilities

to produce knowledge independently, away from European or Western mediators or proxies.

This experience showed me the vast gap between the debate among young researchers from the Global South in the West, and these ‘professors’ in their homelands. Yes, it is as much a generation gap as it is an epistemic gap. I had not imagined hearing and experiencing denial in my homeland, and towards local and indigenous thinkers who are being celebrated and rediscovered in the West. Instead of sparking a new debate about indigenous and neglected knowledge, ‘enough with Ibn Khaldun’, a Francophone Lebanese anthropologist professor angrily told me when I proposed to the conference organizers the names of local thinkers for the upcoming conference sessions.

This time I didn’t need a white European man to make me feel denied; some of our friends, fellow Arabs, and Global South scholars had done enough. This was not the first time. There were many incidents in which I was denied and bullied—like when an Egyptian-American researcher attacked me personally on Facebook. At that time, I had deactivated my account because I was working on my PhD, and had published a paper about the lack of revolution in Upper Egypt. This researcher attacked me and denied my identity. She claimed that the author was not from Upper Egypt and did not live there. She acted as an authority who had the details and names of all Upper Egyptian people. Moreover, she doubted that I had done fieldwork or interviews at all, simply because my paper’s findings challenged the results of her work, on which she had built her reputation in the US. At that time, two white European researchers (a woman and a man) whom I didn’t know personally back then stood up for me, to the point where one of them accused her of being biased and discriminatory and treating me with condescension. The sad thing is that I did not know anything about these attacks until a dear friend sent me screenshots of the post and the comments exchanged between these professors. What an irony.

Southampton: February–March 2024

The barbaric and genocidal war waged by the State of Israel on the Gaza Strip since November 2023 has prevented me from fulfilling my promise to the book editors to submit this chapter in January 2024. Not only is the

brunt of Israeli state terror too much for someone like me to bear—I am not only a proud Arab and unquestioned supporter of the Palestinian cause since my socio-political awareness has taken shape, but I am also personally involved in the conflict since my father's brother (Uncle Najah) was martyred by the Israeli army during the October 1973 War (known as the Yom Kippur War). In addition, I have been living in an atmosphere of war daily, not only since October 2023 but since February 2022. My partner is from Ukraine, and half of our family now lives under the daily bombing of Kyiv since the Russian full colonial invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This has not only made me stressed (reaching the point of eczema, skin rashes, and frequent sleep disturbances), but has also completely affected my productivity and concentration.

In contrast to the generosity, understanding, and support of the editors, who were kind enough to give me an extension for a full four months, all I received from the university where I work was nothing but denial, disappointment, and lack of help or sympathy. It even reached the point of denouncing me and denying my right to express my opinion. I am not exaggerating if I say that it reaches the level of direct threat if I should continue to show my sympathy and support for the Palestinian cause at the university, or on my personal social media platform accounts. Here I will only talk about one incident of denial, where I literally have been denied my right to express my opinion and been deprived of that right through verbal intimidation.

The incident took place at the beginning of February when I was taken by surprise by a letter from the head of the department in which I work. They asked me to meet with them as soon as possible, which was a completely unusual and unexpected request, especially since the relationship with them was cold and rigid. Anyway, I told them that I was available at any time that suited them. So, we arranged a meeting through Teams two days after I received the message. The interview lasted approximately 40-45 minutes. They began by saying that they did not know that I was Palestinian (I am not and never claimed that), and that they feel guilty because they had never checked on me since October/November (which gives us a glimpse of the absence of care, empathy, and solidarity within academia despite the overwhelming phony and vaunted signs of care and support). I told them that there was no need to be ashamed (as a courtesy so they would not be

embarrassed). They added that they had come to ask me about myself one day but that I was not in my office. All of this British politeness was a prelude to the bomb that was shortly to explode in my face. But before informing me of the hidden message/threat, they insisted on expressing their beliefs in freedom of expression and the right to freedom of speech, how the university does not have any right to interfere with staff's rights or expression of their opinions, and how they support and nurture early career researchers, diversity and inclusion, and blah blah blah. Then the tone changed and became firmer and more authoritative. They said that the Vice-Chancellor's office (the VC office) had received complaints from three Jewish organizations complaining and objecting to some of my tweets, three of which they mentioned, along with their exact time and dates, and alleging that these tweets were anti-Israeli because of comparing the State of Israel to the Nazi regime.

Then, they mentioned that the VC office had asked them as the head of the department to talk to me in a friendly way and try to resolve the issue amicably. When I tried to interrupt them to tell them that I trusted their judgment and to ask what they would advise me to do, they still thought I was making trouble. After they finished speaking, I told them what I wanted to say. After all, as the Head of the Department, they are the first line of defence of my academic rights and my right to free expression, and I am also legally accountable to them as my direct boss.

After they mentioned the tweets, I went back to my account and reviewed the mentioned tweets. I found that I had retweeted tweets by critical and anti-Zionist Israeli researchers who opposed the war on Gaza. The second tweet was a cartoon comparing the condition of children in Gaza with Jewish children during the Holocaust, by making the poster boy for the movie 'The Boy in the Striped Pajamas' look like a Palestinian child in Gaza. In the third tweet, I wrote: 'The Palestinians feel that what Israel is doing to them is similar to what the Nazis did to the Jews'—a statement that has been repeated by researchers around the world, such as Masha Gessen, Norman Finkelstein and others.

I was drained, exhausted, and stressed. I did not want to get into ridiculous and stupid fights, or to feel what Sara Ahmed once described as 'the sense of why I should have to be the one who speaks out'. You have to speak out because others do not, but because you speak out others can justify their own silence; they hear you, so it becomes about

you, so that ‘major access issues’ become “your issues’. So I said to the Head of Department (HOD) in the meeting: What do you advise me then? (In Britain, you must directly mention that you are asking for advice, otherwise no one will advise you.) It appeared to me that I was correct in my guesses that they had ready-made solutions. The HOD told me: you have two solutions. The first solution suggested that (said the HOD) ‘since you belong to the University of Southampton and put it in your Twitter profile’, in their view my posts embarrassed the university and placed it under pressure from donors or benefactors. Thus, I should remove my affiliation with the university from social media, defining my opinions as personal opinion, from a person who has nothing to do with the university—i.e., denying the fact that I work at this university at all. The second solution the HOD suggested was ‘to delete these controversial tweets’ (i.e. deny my right to expression)? They also informed me that if I did this, they would defuse the problem with the VC office, but at the same time, that they wouldn’t force me to make any of these choices (in theory). This was the first time this information was conveyed, and also the only time. In fact, I had the feeling that they had given me information that I shouldn’t have known, as if I were stupid or naive.

After I explained to them the way in which I was responsible for these tweets in the event of any legal question, I referred to evidence that these were published and truthful opinions. So, I have nothing to fear. However, given what I experienced as an atmosphere of intimidation and pressure regarding the potential extension or non-renewal of my contract, how can my rights and freedom be denied by those who are entrusted with defending academic freedom? Once again this reminds me of what Gloria Anzaldúa said about how ‘Wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out’. Therefore, I found it absurd and useless to enter into an imaginary Quixotic battle with these people. I don’t need new enemies; I have enough already. I decided that I would screenshot the tweets until the appropriate time came to publish an account of the injustice, denial, and threats that I experienced from the institution entrusted with defending my academic rights, as guaranteed by law.

Here I am today writing about it, faster than I expected or frankly hoped. I deleted the tweets, and in spite of this, the HOD’s attitude towards me changed completely, for the worse. After this incident which

created problems for them with the administration, which is exactly the opposite of what they had told me during our interview, I was informed that my contract would not be renewed for another year. Moreover, they tried to prevent me from exercising my right to be nominated for an academic award. Here we go again; I had to fight for this right, this time with bitterness and sorrow. I was forced, for the first time in my life, to use expressions that I abhor and hate from the bottom of my heart because of the racism, discrimination, and entitlement they carry. I had to write to them saying that I am almost the only researcher of colour and from the Global South... etc., to urge them to approve my nomination request. In other words, to obtain one of my most basic rights, I must first humiliate myself and use terms and labels I hate the most and have never used before in my personal or professional lives alike.

However, I will not be intimidated or remain silent. I spoke out, confronted, and wrote, and will continue to speak out, to confront, and to write against this injustice and denial, because the most regretted action one can take, as Audre Lorde tells us, is our silence.

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect.

—Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (2017, p. 40)

Indeed, ‘the more complaints are contained, the more we need to express them, to get them out, keep them alive; the more we need to sneak, to leak, to leave trails behind us so that others can find us’ (Sara Ahmed, 2021), in spite of all the forms of violence, oppression, and discrimination that we suffer from. Once again, Sara Ahmed reminds us that if we want to diminish this violence, and yes, there is so much violence in the containment of violence, ‘We have to shatter that container’. As academic, pacifist, and civil activists, our primary weapon is our writings, our words, our teaching, and our classrooms. Speaking out, as Audre Lorde over and over reminds us, is ‘a litany for survival’, at least in some of its forms. Even with the overwhelming feeling that all you seem to have done is scratch the surface, Sara Ahmed courageously reminds us that ‘scratching can give a sense of the limits of what you can accomplish’ (Ahmed, 2021).

if we speak we are afraid
 that our words will be used
 against us
 And if we do not speak
 we are still afraid
 So, it is better to speak
 knowing we were never meant to survive.
 A Litany for Survival

Usually, in the face of all these discourses and practices, I find myself torn between speaking up or remaining silent about such injustices. This indecision lasts only a few minutes before it fades away, when I consciously remind myself of all the bad memories of that damn condescending, discriminatory, and liberatory advice to *aish aishat ahlak* ('live the life of your folks' or 'stay in your box/ghetto'), that phrase embodying all parameters of class, race, political, social, legal, economic, religious, ethnic, and knowledge denial. I never allowed and never will allow anyone to define me, either in the past or in the future. They never did when I was an undergraduate student in Upper Egypt, and they will never do so now that I have gained my PhD (a privilege that I earned with my sweat, tears, and hard labour, and which places on my shoulders a huge responsibility towards my family, my people, and my colleagues (*Nosotros los pobres*) who are coming from the same suffering—and have even less than me—and are trying damn hard to make it into academia); and now that I have found my voice, whether in the Arab World, in Europe, in the UK, in the US, or anywhere else. I will not be silenced, I will not be quiet, and I will never be intimidated. It's as simple as that.

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6. Despotic Devices; Yet Another Form

Anonymous

Migration is displacement, quite literally in the Palestinian case, even when migration appears to be a choice.

I never chose to leave, I never wished myself to be living anywhere away from my family and friends, anywhere away from home. No existence makes sense beyond its borders, no existence makes sense within. We're made to form a distorted relation with the homeland.

We are coerced to leave; we're made to leave in so many different ways. We're kicked out, we're prosecuted, we're banned, we're politically at risk. We're made not to survive economically; we're made to look for life elsewhere.

We're pressed to pursue documentation and identity, we're made to look for freedom.

We're bound to follow our dreams elsewhere.

We're intimidated to escape checkpoints, gunshots, gas canisters.

We're obligated to elude bombardment.

We're forced to escape genocide.

We don't choose to leave.

Is it really a choice when all and any means of life is robbed?

Is then, Palestinian migration, for whatever purpose, and regardless whose decision it is, a form of exile?

Exile?

Exile as 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place'? (Said, 2000, p. 137).

* * * * *

I didn't leave because of how unbearable reality has become in the past two years. If anything, in comparison, my reality was still fairly sufferable; I had lived in Ramallah, and despite the constant closures, road blocks, city invasions, regular clashes, despite the 'normal/banal' risk of living under occupation, life seemed to keep going.

Unemployment was at an all-time high, no material conditions for survival, increased restrictions on mobility, more risk of being abducted by the Israeli army, of wasting hours on checkpoints, of being shot at, of, of, of... Still, in Ramallah, we experienced the least of genocidal evil.

I left to follow my dream of pursuing academia. I was excited about the prospect, I'd always wanted to do research. I'd felt stuck at work as a freelancer, so when I got accepted for the PhD position in the Netherlands, I was ecstatic and also burdened; it was never in the cards to leave Palestine during a genocide.

* * * * *

Migration is displacement.

A physical and an emotional uprooting. I arrived here September, 2024, almost a year into the Israeli genocide of Gaza. I left a state of brutal living, to experience a state of dissociative alienation. I could not reconcile with ordinariness around me, against relentless violence in Palestine. Every passing minute brought another demolished home, another abducted prisoner, another fallen journalist, another grieving mother.

There, time is measured with loss and death. Here, with pleasure.

* * * * *

Migration is displacement.

A centuries old process of ethnic cleansing and generational trauma.
Non-stop heartache of being out-of-space and out-of-time.

Migration is displacement,
is ethnic cleansing,
is not a choice.

But I count my blessings and I 'choose' to leave.
And here I am, practising non-belonging in pursuit of a dream.

* * * * *

I had planned to start my fieldwork in Palestine during the summer. I was excited to finally go home, to reconnect with family and friends. Above all, I wished to lessen the time I spent away from home. Distance had meant lost time. Lost time had meant emotional and relational disparity; family, friends and land changing under brutal realities, I change separately.

I know what it means when a country is under occupation.
Subtle but compound changes that I can barely comprehend.
Spaces confined, spirits hardened.

The current genocide has made those changes excessively explicit. I had gone for a visit after two months of being in the Netherlands, and I could already see how much has changed, new gateways blocking entrances and exits of cities, new isolation tactics that have left people estranged and bewildered, more aggression and non-stop brutality confining hope, unleashing a collective sense of helplessness and defeat.

So when June came around, when it was time for my second visit, I had a yearning to go back, because every minute I spent away during the genocide felt like a stretched moment of estrangement. Israel had other plans. A war between Israel and Iran had erupted. The destruction that unfolded was accompanied by increased travel restrictions. The blocked air spaces had meant that my trip to Palestine was cancelled.

I could have made rearrangements after the bombing had stopped, but the confines of academic pursuit in Europe are suffocating. The Netherlands classifies Palestine as a red zone country; too risky and dangerous. And as a researcher residing in the Netherlands, I was tasked to justify why I cannot conduct my research here instead, why I needed to travel to Palestine, why I needed to return home. Again, I was handed a form to fill.

* * * * *

This was not the first form I was asked to fill. Conducting research means you must consider academic ethical procedures and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) regulations. Researching Palestine at a time of genocide required extra forms. For data privacy, and considering the sensitivity of the data I'll be working with, I was asked to develop a data management plan and a data protection impact assessment.

More forms had meant less time to spend on actual research. Longer time away from home. It all seemed reasonable until I learned that the same data would be stored on Microsoft-operated cloud servers. The forms became an exercise in futility as I contemplated Microsoft's complicity in violating Palestinian digital rights and facilitating Israeli military access and weaponization of data against Palestinians (Davies and Abraham, 2025).

I've begun to see the rigidity of academic bureaucracy (and hypocrisy), spaces and structures not built for the likes of me. Was this a dissonance between the theory and practice of critical thinking, or the deepening alienation that surfaces every time I confront these systems?

The forms extended beyond the university's walls. Western racialized structures are designed to maintain our state of non-belonging, to keep us endlessly chasing, never arriving.

* * * * *

I'd been accepted to present at an academic conference, and I was excited for the opportunity. I would get to showcase my work, and to meet like-minded academics who share similar decolonial perspectives. It felt like I could finally meet peers who think of academia along the same veins, and research similar topics of interest.

I began preparing myself for the trip months in advance. My Palestinian passport constrains access to most Western countries. Borders lie well in advance, invisible, bureaucratic time-consuming structures crowned into concrete form.

I have to apply for a visa; one of the most anxiety-inducing experiences I go through. I am asked to fill in an exhaustive form that asks me ridiculously intrusive questions; where I have travelled the past ten years, my family history, my political associations, whether I am

engaged in any terrorist activities or involved in extremist organizations. Invasive supportive documents are also requested; professional affiliations, financial statements, photocopies of every page of my passport, invitation letters from the conference.

The emotional labour is accompanied by a financial burden. It takes days to collect documents, it takes an eternity to make sense of stolen agency.

I book my appointment for the biometrics and documents drop-in. This was an intricate process. You're giving up your passport for at least three weeks, so the appointment needs to coincide with a timing that does not conflict with any other travel plans that you may have. If you're lucky, they might have an availability that works for you.

For the last three nights before the appointment, I had nightmares that I'd missed a document, that I'd forgotten my passport, or that the train would be delayed and I'd miss my appointment.

* * * * *

The day of the appointment is windy and cold, and I travel three hours to get there. The train I'm on gets delayed, but I learned to calculate for disappointments early on in life. The unpredictability of movement in Palestine, and the amount of time we waste on checkpoints teaches us something about uncertainty.

I get there with time to spare. They don't let me in early. Waiting at the borders is a heartbreaking experience. Every passing minute steals away potential precious moments of life, every minute you're confronted with the fact that you're made to be lesser than.

I come back fifteen minutes before my appointment and they ask for the payment. The payment was supposed to be made online but the website malfunctioned so I thought I'd be able to do it at the centre. I'm startled and all the anxiety that I've been trying to bury deep slowly starts to surface. The security guard acknowledges the 'free Palestine' pin on my bag. He lets me in to meet with the employee who can help.

To get in, you have to go through a security check, just like at an airport. I place my bag on the machine belt, and I go through the scanner before I'm allowed to pass.

The employee helps me manage the payment, and then asks about

my documents. I was also unable to upload them as the website malfunctioned. She says that they can offer an upload service for an additional 60 euros. I have already paid approximately 300 euros for this visa, I protest against any additional payment. She says I have ten minutes to try on my own. For that I have to exit their office and come back again.

I follow the exit signs, and I try to sign into the portal. Every time I try to upload a document the system logs out. After a few failed attempts, and tightening in my chest, I return to report the error, forced to pass through security again.

I drop my bags on the belt, go through the body scan, and show the system error. Noticing my rising anxiety, kindly, she offers me another ten minutes.

I follow the exit signs again.

I'm in a loop.

I try to upload the documents, the website crashes.

I've travelled three hours, I've paid 300 euros, I can't miss my appointment, I can't be denied entry.

Not before applying.

Borders are a state of paralysis.

My heart races, anxiety at a peak. I find myself in tears.

I'm in the loop again,
mentally and physically.

I leave my bag on the belt, I go through the body scanner, I'm allowed to enter, I tell her it's not working, I show her how it logs me out.

She tries to calm me down: 'take a breath', she says. 'We're here to help you, with the additional fee'.

I'm enraged, emotional. I give in. What's another layer of injustice, I think? Bureaucratic structured forms stealing time, kidnapping life.

I'm upset with myself that I crumbled into tears rather than rage.

Eyes puffy and red, they let me in to collect my photo, biometrics and documents. If the visa is issued, the photo they capture of me will be printed on my passport, a testament of 'good' migrant; broken and made to fight for dignity and humanity.

* * * * *

Since June 2025, I've been suspended in time, experiencing an elongated state of waiting on borders. Living day by day trying to manoeuvre the impossibilities of starting a PhD and engaging in the academic sphere.

What I've gone through for conference participation takes the backseat. Other forms caused more disruptions.

The red zones and risk assessment forms have been a cruel endeavour that endangered the PhD timeline and topic. I had spent a year polishing my proposal and preparing for fieldwork to learn that I might not be able to implement it. The argument was for my safety, the university cannot take the responsibility of sending me to a dangerous country.

Bureaucratic hypocrisy at play again.

I was in a state of rupture. It felt like institutional logic lacked flexibility and understanding.

Returning home is a form of re-rooting.

How do you explain that to Eurocentric systems refusing to comprehend the intricate realities of Palestinian existence? How do you make understandable the risks they fear are daily encounters?

It is inconceivable to seek approval for return from a European academic institution. Safety is always the concern. But my safety only matters as part of a bureaucratic structure.

I recognize the claim, but I long for ecosystems that free rather than enchain.

Safety is calling for Palestinian liberation, standing against genocide, centring agency and knowledge, not in reproducing (academic) injustice.

Caring for safety makes sense when it extends beyond their direct responsibilities.

* * * * *

'As the days passed I began to understand... You do not arrive unchanged at the moment of joy dreamt for so long across the years' (Barghouti, 2000, p. 72).

The deepest pain in this migrant experience is the impossibility of weaving together two separate times.

I wonder how colonial time continues to shape my family, friends,

my people, and how I could possibly, alone, step outside it into a new form of racialized colonialism and alienation.

Who will I meet when I return? And what version of me would they meet?

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7. Navigating American Academia amidst Global Unrest, or Why We Should Complain More

Aizada Arystanbek

In 2019, during the second year of my Master's studies in Spain, I penned an op-ed for *openDemocracy* where I set out to scrutinize the challenges of a Central Asian feminist scholar within gender studies. In it, I wrote about having to stitch together my academic identity from various feminist theories from all over the world, all of which spoke to some of my experiences without ever precisely capturing what it is like to be from Kazakhstan and study gender. Acknowledging my challenges and sharing them with the world was a freeing experience that allowed me to enjoy the rest of my studies and come to terms with my identity. At the risk of romanticizing my past scholarly experience and European scholarship in general, I look back at my time in Europe as a somewhat uncomplicated time when I was more or less sheltered from the many structural inequalities of academia. My transition from a Master's degree to a doctoral one, which included switching from a European university setting to an American one, has been a much more tumultuous experience complicated by political crises at home.

In this chapter, I explore my experience of attending an American graduate school. Conceiving this essay, I was unsure of how I could approach this text to make a poignant critique on imbalances within power structures of academia and how they affect migrants from the Global South specifically without coming across as complaining. In her book *Complaint!*, Sara Ahmed writes, 'To be heard as complaining is not to be heard. To hear someone as complaining is an effective

way of dismissing someone. You do not have to listen to the content of what she is saying if she is *just* complaining or *always* complaining' (Ahmed, 2021, 1). Writing and verbalizing issues within academia is often perceived as fruitless, almost trite. A new generation of graduate students comes along every year and they always have something to *complain* about. Ahmed points out that complaints are often heard as a tiresome distraction from the 'real work'. If complaining will not get you anywhere, why engage in it?

American Dream in Academia

To explain my choice of pursuing a PhD in the United States, it is worth noting that my undergraduate studies and the first year of my Master's studies were conducted at institutions with an American model of education, namely: Nazarbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan and Central European University in Budapest, Hungary. Both universities are located outside of the US while employing many American educators and American credit systems. Once I started discussing my potential future in academia with mentors and teachers, the message was clear: a graduate degree from an American university would get me farther in life than a degree from any other institution, especially given my background (Kazakhstani citizenship and nationality, a bachelor's degree from a Kazakhstani university). It is worth pointing out that many of those advisers were American or American-trained academics, which significantly affected their perception of opportunities in the field. Another important point for consideration was the fact that American PhD programs are typically fully funded, whereas, in many European universities, you have to secure funding in addition to general admission. Such fundings are often restricted by citizenships and areas of study, adding hurdles to young scholars from the Global South like myself.

I am confident that I was not alone in my conviction that getting into a graduate school in the US would set me on the path to academic success. Academia is not immune to American cultural and economic domination. Moreover, I was warned many times about the level of hardship and precarity that plague graduate students in America, often by the same academic advisors who suggested I apply to the US. These

warnings were usually quite general in their arguments. They focused on the lack of free time, the need to work hard, to prepare oneself for a long ride that goes beyond the initial five-year funding plan, etc. Having heard the same warnings about my Bachelor's and Master's studies, I was convinced that, yes, graduate studies in America would be hard, but it was nothing I had not handled before. The lack of support system, expensive airfare to travel home, and understanding the bureaucratic hoops you have to jump through as a Global South migrant—none of this was mentioned in the warnings and advice dispensed to me. Looking back at those conversations, I wonder: if these warnings were more nuanced and articulated the specificities of a Global South immigrant experience, would they have seemed so innocuous and exaggerated to the younger me? If someone spoke to me from their unique positionality of a female scholar from Kazakhstan migrating to America all on her own, while still having to financially help her parents back home, would I have as easily dismissed their advice?

Ahmed's framework of a feminist ear (Ahmed, 2017) helps me to reframe complaints about my chosen career and recognize the value of formulating and sharing our grievances to build institutional transparency and workers' solidarity. Ahmed advocates for the need to lend a feminist ear to complaints to de-trivialize them and highlight systemic failures and obstacles of higher education institutions that are often obscured by minimizing and deterring individual complaints. 'A complaint provides a *phenomenology of the institution*. You become more attuned to the environment of the institution; you begin to perceive what might have been part of the background' (Ahmed, 2021, 41). Thus, the goal for sharing my story is to contribute to the normalization of sharing different perspectives and grievances that we as scholars from the Global South encounter in our migration journey to the US and American academia to help us, current young scholars and those who are considering a career in research and education, to conceive of academia as a field with specific systemic challenges and obstacles. Academia remains a highly individualized field, where one's success as a researcher and author defines a career and fosters a level of influence that often allows scholars to prioritize their personal goals and success over the collective. We as academics are frequently convinced that our research interests should take priority over teaching and fitting

into a larger goal of a department or a discipline. Because academia prioritizes collaboration as a tool for individual advancement, it creates an environment where graduate mentors can adopt an extractive style of advising their students and pass down the same priorities and power dynamics.

Transitioning to American Academia: Challenges and Expectations

I was admitted into Rutgers University's sociology graduate program in January 2021 and enrolled in the program in September later that year. Before I arrived at Rutgers, I faced the first challenge of paying student fees without receiving the stipend yet. The fees were due in August, while the first paycheck would come in mid-September. I was working full time at the time, but my Kazakhstani salary was not nearly enough to purchase me a one-way ticket to New York, pay student fees, and afford first-month rent and deposit. I tried to save at least for the student fees, which my program coordinator informed me in April would be around \$1,000. In August, I was billed with \$1,500. When I asked the coordinator why the sum has increased by \$500, which may not be a huge sum of money in the US, but it certainly is in Kazakhstan, they shrugged it off as a minor fluctuation that occurs every year. My feeling of accomplishment for being on the precipice of beginning doctoral studies was stunted by having to take out a bank loan last minute, which I am still paying off today.

The first year of my graduate studies aligned with regional and global turmoil. In January 2022, Kazakhstan saw the largest and deadliest protests in its independent history. Qandy Qantar (Bloody January) events led to the death of more than 230 people, most of whom are believed to be civilians, and a destabilization of security within the country. A month later, Russia escalated its occupation of Ukraine into a full-time war. While these events draw American academia's interest toward Central Asia, they fail to dismantle the entrenched unequal power dynamics within a neoliberal framework. This essay explores my academic journey amidst these crises, acknowledging the mental and emotional toll and the continued marginalization of Central Asian narratives within academia.

The tumultuous events in Central Asia during my first year at Rutgers University's sociology graduate program added an unexpected layer to my academic journey. As I delved into the rigorous coursework and engaged in intellectual discussions, the echoes of Qandy Qantar and the escalating war in Ukraine reverberated in my mind. These events not only shaped the focus of my academic inquiries but also underscored the pressing need for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of global issues within the academic realm. Being the only graduate student from Central Asia in my department, I felt quite isolated in my processing of the collective trauma of Qandy Qantar and the escalated violence of Russia in the region. Sharing my experience with members of my department continuously involved educating others about the geopolitical history of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. As a doctoral student, I had certain expectations to meet concerning productivity and participation in the life of the department. I struggled to remain productive while monitoring developments in Central Asia and Ukraine.

Professional Opportunity vs Communal Grievances

In the aftermath of Qandy Qantar and the start of the war in Ukraine, academia's interest in Central Asia spiked dramatically with conferences dedicated to Russian imperialism and decolonization, opinion essays, research papers, and Twitter takes emerging with an unprecedented velocity. In these discussions, Central Asia was often positioned as a third passive party defined by its political leadership and with the potential to benefit from the influx of Russian migrants fleeing from Vladimir Putin's partial mobilization (Arystanbek, 2023). While many experienced Central Asian researchers and educators were platformed and prioritized in some of these conversations, Western scholars continue(d) to dominate the discourse within the highly bureaucratized structures of academia. While attending one such conference at Columbia University in May 2022, I struggled to reconcile the chasm between the abstract conversations about the impact the current events could have on Central Asia in the halls of the Ivy League school and the urgency and affect felt in more informal settings of Kazakhstan and the Central Asian diaspora. That week in May, Columbia was flooded with 'post-Soviet' experts and regional scholars, who networked during

coffee breaks about collaborating on books, papers, and panels. Two months later in July, I found myself in Almaty, Kazakhstan speaking with local educators and organizers who also mentioned books and panels that needed to be written and organized. However, the difference between these two settings was palpable to me as the former was driven by professional opportunity and research interests, while the latter was focused on communal grievances. Questions of survival, imagination, and finding meaning in the new world seemed to be more grounded and tied to real-life experiences in non-academic settings as opposed to Western research conferences.

The chasm I felt continues to affect my identity as an academic and as a migrant scholar in the US. It seems to me that my community is going through historic changes and producing urgent knowledge that often falls on the margins of Western interest in Central Asia, while I am encouraged to focus on my individual professional development and tasked with relating my research to larger sociological frameworks to locate myself within the field of sociology and pave the way for my future in American academia. In my program, all graduate students are required to submit an annual individual development plan where we report not only on our progress within the program but our achievements as well. These can include conference attendance, publications, etc. I always feel proud about my participation in Central Asian scholarly and cultural discourses. This is what I continue to prioritize in my planning. However, most of the organizations, academic journals, conferences, and universities that I have worked with since I got to Rutgers and that I diligently report in my development plan every year do not signal a status of significant achievement to my department. Graduate students of sociology in the US are encouraged to apply to the American Sociological Association, which hosts annual conferences that are considered to be highly important for networking and promoting one's work. I have never applied nor attended the ASA mostly because it is held in the summer, at the time when I visit Kazakhstan to care for my parents, conduct fieldwork, and visit the doctors that I cannot afford in the US. Moreover, as a graduate student, we are offered very limited funds for conference participation. While the ASA is very prestigious, it is also not cheap. Throughout the years, I have opted for spending my travel grants on more localized regional conferences, which offer more

insight for my research. Thus, while I personally never felt the need to partake in the rites of passage for American sociology doctoral students due to my distinct regional focus and decolonial methodological approach, I do have a feeling that my non-American-academia-related accomplishments go largely unnoticed by the department, which affects their understanding of my scholarly identity.

Navigating through these challenges, I found myself grappling not only with the academic rigour demanded by my program but also with the emotional and mental toll of witnessing the consequences of these crises, while physically remaining away from my family and loved ones, in a space where life continued as normal. The distance from my homeland, compounded by the emotional weight of the events, made me acutely aware of the need for a more empathetic and intersectional approach to academic pursuits. I have always gravitated toward the framework of decolonial feminism and tried to implement it in my research and teaching as much as possible. Decolonial feminism posits that the standpoint of the researcher fundamentally informs their perspective and research. It is impossible to separate the socio-political landscapes of a researcher from their epistemology. While I frequently felt the nudge from my department to move on from my internal crises from processing the events in Central Asia, I also acutely understood that separating myself from the conversations and struggles of my community back home would be damaging to my research and the values I strive to uphold.

Intersections of Trauma and Academic Fetishization

Just as Ahmed demonstrates in *Complaint!*, this led me to become more attuned to the gaps between an appearance and experience within an academic institution. Political participation and responses to world crises are integral parts of American academia's interests as it positions itself directly invested in the upholding of freedom of speech and education. While this appearance remains true, my personal experience indicates that those interests are prioritized when they lead to tangible results in one's career, such as a timely research paper, self-labelling as a regional expert, etc., as opposed to a genuine investment in the well-being and alternative futures of communities in the Global South. To

extend Ahmed's argument, I argue here that complaints we make as postcolonial subjects acquire special power in uncovering our *otherness* within academic settings.

One particular moment during my first year of PhD served as a catalyst for my alienation from academia. The next day after Russia declared a full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022, I had one of my seminar classes scheduled. The class was a requirement for my coursework as a graduate student. The instructor of the class was also my first-year advisor in the department. Having been extremely emotionally overwhelmed and committed to showing up to local protests against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, I emailed the professor to notify her that I would not be joining the class that day due to my vulnerable emotional and mental well-being. Shortly after I sent the email, the professor called my cell phone (in an unprecedented manner, since we exchanged numbers to communicate via text should the need arise) and asked me to explain to her how exactly the war related to me. Exasperated at first, I explained my understanding of geopolitics in the region, my worry about my home country sharing the longest continuous international border with Russia, along with the history of colonization and close political and economic ties, and what it means for me to watch such a powerful neighbour and previous colonizer engage in a military aggression against Ukraine. I also explained that I have family and loved ones living in countries neighbouring Ukraine. It was the first week of the war. Many things were unclear and the fear, on top of my still processing January protests in Kazakhstan, was paralyzing. The professor understood my point of view. Her suggestion was to attend the lecture anyway and for me to hold a separate lecture explaining the nuances of the Russian-Ukrainian war to other students. While, at first, I took the offer as a sign that perhaps my perspective was useful to my professor and she deemed it as deserving of being shared, later I realized that I ended up with more tasks and responsibilities than I intended to when I asked to be excused from attending the seminar.

I share this anecdote here as an illustrative example of how collective trauma and the identities of scholars can become lucrative avenues for fetishization in academic settings. I believe that the professor thought it would be useful for me to share my knowledge and for other students to learn more about the war that was making headlines in the US. I did end

up writing and presenting the lecture a week later. However, as I rushed into new tasks and was essentially encouraged to view the situation as an opportunity to position myself as an expert on the issue, I did not attend to my well-being and had little time to check in with my friends and family.

Conclusion

One of the aims of scholarly knowledge is digesting current events and helping people develop a more critical and intersectional approach to consuming media and understanding the world. This is a primary reason why I chose to pursue a PhD and become an educator. I held strong (and idealistic) beliefs that entering academic circles that produce knowledge on Central Asia and adopting a decolonial approach to this production would be my way of aiding Central Asians in understanding our region and the world, while also bringing forth a more grassroots perspective on the region that would enrich the academic discourse by decentring the West as the main point of reference in understanding Central Asia.

Therefore, I understand the importance of the Bloody January protests and the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine for Kazakhstani people, and I am not making an argument that all epistemology on the topics should have been halted due to the mental duress experienced by the people. However, the line between acknowledging the effects of such large-scale events on young graduate students at the very beginning of their careers and encouraging said students to view these events as a stepping-stone toward distinct scholarly identity is blurry. This is a moment of interest in my 'Third World country' that I am prompted not to miss out on. Having dealt with a general lack of interest or a very Westernized point of view on Central Asia throughout my studies, I did ponder if this moment could be useful for my chances in the ever-shrinking job market that all academics constantly complain about. Thus, I found myself in a peculiar position of pushing myself through an internal state of panic and prioritizing educating others. Later on, as I reflected on that moment, I resented the fact that I was seemingly invited to give a lecture on the Russian-Ukrainian war because I am from Central Asia (and the only current student from the 'post-Soviet space'). Prior to the war, even during the January protests, no one in

the department seemed to have an interest in my expertise or verbally recognized the urgency and complexity of the situation without my commentary. At the same time, I was gripped by fear that if I do not remain productive and insert myself into the conversation now, I will not only be losing points for my resume, but I will be leaving more space for non-Central Asian scholars to platform their analysis of the region. All of this resulted in further burnout and alienation from my department and academia, while simultaneously doing research.

This essay has been hard to write for me, not due to the lack of material or emotional investment. I questioned every paragraph I put on paper as I was afflicted with shame for complaining about things that appeared to be mundane and essential to academic training. Academics, especially the ones you can find on Twitter, often boast about distressing work hours, unfinished manuscripts, and endless looming deadlines. There are many jokes and memes online about issues of academia that allow scholars to commiserate with each other. However, while there seems to be a shared understanding of how tough it is to be an academic, openly criticizing the structures of the institution of (particularly) Western academia is not something that is necessarily encouraged. Students and young scholars from Global South are expected to buy into the idea of American meritocracy and prove their dedication through hard work. In academic work culture, suffering leads to brilliant work, while precarity defined by migration status and citizenship in the Global South is a minor factor that is supposed to be overcome due to the premise of meritocracy. Therefore, complaints are minimized and dismissed. If you complained and still managed to write and defend your research, there must not be anything substantial behind your complaints. If you complained and ended up leaving academia (an option that I think about often even during my third year of training), then perhaps you were not brilliant or hardworking enough, or all the complaining got in the way of your work.

Two years after Qandy Qantar and the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, my conviction that academia needs to become more open to the perspectives and grievances of the scholars from the Global South remains strong. I continue upholding my values of decolonial intersectional research, which guides me in navigating turbulent times as American universities continue to crack down on freedom of speech,

especially when we speak out for free Palestine and against genocide enabled by the US military. Ultimately, a certain level of precarity will always accompany Global South scholars in their migration to American academia. However, scholars like us will continue to pursue American degrees and training in our passion for knowledge production. Accommodating and uplifting such scholars, as well as encouraging diversity of perspectives and methods, should be a priority for any department that admits international students.

When writing this essay, I imagined veteran academics (in my mind, it is usually my advisor or department chair) reading it and finding no real ground for complaints. I was continuously looking at my struggles from their points of view as they bore more authority and value than my own, even in my mind. I am thankful for other scholars who have shared their journeys in the previous volume of *Migrant Academics' Narratives* and those academics I have connected with personally for challenging the dismissal of my complaints and seeing value in sharing our narratives not just to expose structures informed by imperialism and capitalism that continue to uphold Western academia but hopefully to make space for collaboration toward change in the production of knowledge on the Global South.

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For more on being a migrant academic in alienating political environments, read Ahmed, Aida, Anonymous, Tereza, and Victoria in this volume.

For more on surviving (North American) graduate school, read Julio, Shilpa, and Farinaz in this volume.

For more on financial precarity, read Amisah, Farinaz, Julio, Reda, and Shilpa in this volume.

For more by scholars from Eastern Europe and Central Asia, read Anonymous, 'A Stroll through the Darkness: The Mental Health Struggles of a Migrant Academic', in Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023), pp. 61–8, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.07>; Strelkov, 'Conversation with San Precario', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 137–42, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.14>; Maryna Shevtsova, 'Eighty Dates around the World: On Gender, Academic Mobility, and Reproductive Pressure', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 71–81, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.08>; Olga Burlyuk, 'A Smart Hot Russian Girl from Odessa: When Gender Meets Ethnicity in Academia', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 163–80, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.17>; Vera Axyonova, 'A Journey to the "Self": From Precarity as Non-Belonging to the Search for Common Ground', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.01>

8. My Disappointing Life

Aida A. Hozic

I have long delayed writing this text. I have been living in the United States for more than three decades. Since the early 2000s, I have been settled in Florida, in a tenure-track (now tenured) position, teaching International Relations. In 2004, I became a US citizen, ending a period of thirteen years during which I was stateless.

Originally from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sarajevo, I arrived in the US before the beginning of the Yugoslav wars, but the wars quickly caught up with me. After the death of my father in December of 1991, my mother came to visit me in Charlottesville, Virginia, where I was pursuing a PhD in, what was then called, Government and Foreign Affairs. Arriving just a month before the start of the siege of Sarajevo in early 1992, my mother was unable to return home. Soon we were both stateless, without stable sources of income and, in my mom's case, since her knowledge of English was limited, without a job or access to health care. Meanwhile, our hearts were back in Sarajevo, which was being destroyed—physically, by the Serb forces, but also epistemically, by the rest of the world, through the cruel narratives of endemic ethnic hatred, self-inflicted violence, and genocide denial. It was difficult to maintain faith in objective social science under such circumstances and my disillusionment with the discipline of International Relations (IR) has not left me ever since.

The reason why I postponed writing this personal narrative as a 'migrant academic' in the US was that I did not want to confront the depths of my disappointment with the trajectory that I have taken. For years, I have allowed myself to feel paralyzed by the circumstances—the Yugoslav wars, graduate school, refugee status, unemployment, job

insecurities, care for family members. I sought small liberties (alternative approaches to international politics, marginal—from the perspective of IR as a discipline—topics, different writing styles and genres) but I made compromises with the US higher education enterprise as such, even as I recognized its clubby nature, steady narrowing of intellectual boundaries, and irreversible descent into academic unfreedom. I regret those compromises and wonder how I could have broken free earlier, how I might have spoken more loudly about the dangers of beings so embedded within a global political project that was producing not just knowledge but violence as well.

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I still remember the day of my arrival in the US. I flew from Belgrade to New York on JAT (Yugoslav Airlines). It was 30 August 1989. The flight attendants handed us copies of the *New York Post* to read before landing. The lead story was about a businesswoman of immense wealth, Leona Helmsley, who owned properties all over Manhattan, including the Empire State Building, an iconic skyscraper in New York City. According to the newspaper, Helmsley was convicted of tax fraud. The District Attorney who sent her to jail was Rudy Giuliani. Giuliani would go on to become a two-term mayor of New York in the 1990s, running on a platform of ‘tough on crime’. More recently, he has been disbarred for his involvement in efforts to overturn the 2020 US presidential election. He faced multiple legal issues, including election-related indictments and a defamation lawsuit over false claims about election workers.

Leona Helmsley had famously told one of her housekeepers that she did not pay taxes—‘only little people do so’, she allegedly said. In her will, she bequeathed the family fortune to her Maltese dog, whom she treated much better than any of the humans in her surroundings. ‘The Queen of Mean’, as she had come to be known, feuded over New York real estate with a man by the name of Donald Trump. Their meteoric rise in the property markets of the 1980s had come to symbolize the entire ‘Bonfire of the Vanities’ era of Wall Street greed and of New York’s rampant homelessness, which both flourished in Ronald Reagan’s America.

At that time, I did not recognize any of the names. The news stories about Leona Helmsley struck me as grotesque. The summer was

marked by the Tiananmen protests and the student massacre in China. Europe was convulsing as the communist regimes and the Iron Curtain were poised to collapse. There were elections in Nicaragua, where the US Iran–Contra affair had left a bloody trail. The world was in turmoil, there was no doubt that the scope of political change was momentous. But none of that was mentioned in the *Post*. America, where I was landing, seemed to be preoccupied with Leona Helmsley’s jewellery, pets, viciousness, and fraud.

I was young. I was coming from the politically super-charged environments in Yugoslavia and Italy. My friends were artists and anarchists, rock musicians and journalists. We questioned the authority of our parents and professors, of all political and cultural elites. We may not have had grand visions for regime change, but we were not satisfied with the status quo, we despised apparatchiks, and we could see through any ideological BS that we had been served.

Those skills and predispositions were utterly useless in my US graduate program at the University of Virginia (UVA). In those years, Michel Foucault and Edward Said could not even be mentioned in political science seminars at UVA. They represented a challenge to the academic and world order that had to be crushed. ‘Postmodernism’ was bad, even if no one could explain why. It was all ‘relativism’, we were told, a world with no truths or certainty. A literary mambo-jumbo, not serious knowledge. Yet serious othering was inherent in comparative politics classes (a textbook used in the introductory class for which I was a teaching assistant spoke of the lazy Brazilian ‘siesta’ culture and of British deference as the foundation of democratic ethos). One of the professors asked students to repeat and chant after him ‘USSR is an evil empire’. While being trained in International Relations—that very American social science, as Stanley Hoffman had warned—I could not but wonder about the presumed universality of liberal and realist perspectives. And as the war in Bosnia became my primary preoccupation, strategic advice about the US academic job market, with its inherent careerism, was physically painful to absorb.

I was—and still am—surprised by the degree to which ideology is rendered invisible in the United States. I am shocked by how many independently minded academics still echo US foreign policy objectives in their work. I am troubled by the separation between public involvement

and academic writing, by the criteria used to evaluate academic careers, by the devaluation of teaching in university settings. I have wonderful colleagues in the US who have long been writing and working against these trends—I cherish their friendship because I do not think that I would have survived without them. But decades after my arrival, I often feel lonely in the country that is now run by Leona Helmsley’s chief business and personal rival, a man called Donald Trump.

* * * * *

Distant wars have been difficult to watch. The years that I have been living in the US have been marked by perpetual warfare. In my first semester of graduate school, the US invaded Panama in order to depose its leader, General Manuel Noriega, a former CIA asset and a drug-trafficker on its behest. Noriega’s CIA handler used to be George H. W. Bush, the US President at the time of the invasion. A friend, who worked for the State Department, called me one evening after Noriega’s capture. She had seen a front-page article about Noriega in the *New York Times*. She needed to share her dismay that the General allegedly had an English-language copy of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* in his desk. I, in turn, was dismayed by her naiveté. In the years since, in the mansions of many overturned leaders of enemy regimes, similar compromising material was always discovered. The copy-paste blueprint of regime-change troubled me, just like the staged toppling of statues in their every instance. I understand the complex threads of empires’ work and the role of violence with it. I resent the implicit ask to suspend my disbelief in its benevolence.

The period since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Hamas’ attack on October 7, 2023, has been particularly hard. The twin wars in Ukraine and Gaza (and the veil of silence over other related conflicts) have split my academic community and created tensions in personal relationships. The splintering of solidarities, the unwillingness to see connections between atrocities across different war zones, or the dots linking arms trade and AI technology, or the puppeteering by Great Powers—all these blind spots are tearing me apart. I do not have the courage or the temperament of activists yet I cannot condone nationalism or genocide either. Instrumentalization of people’s lives angers me so much that I sometimes think that I will lose my mind. The narratives are

strictly controlled. Our speech is policed.

I followed closely the saga of the US-built floating pier for humanitarian deliveries to Gaza. A \$320-million pier was broken by strong winds and high waves only a week after being set up in May of 2024. It was reinstalled ten days later only to collapse again in early June. Some of its parts eventually washed up on Frishman Beach in Tel Aviv. The scraps were given to the Israeli Defence Forces. What was the purpose of this colossal infrastructure failure? Perhaps, it was never meant to succeed. While the US was supplying arms to Israel, the Biden Administration was still attempting to maintain a fiction that the US was the principal peacemaker in the Middle East. The floating pier embodied that fiction.

Questions about the US's role in the world cannot easily be raised, such is the faith in the indispensable nation. Even if well-intended, a critique can only go so far, before one's patriotism is being called into question or, in the case of migrant academics, their very presence in the country. "Why don't you just go home?" I was asked during the Yugoslav wars whenever I challenged any of the dominant narratives that to me appeared as obvious hoaxes. I have eventually learned how to raise questions without breaking the norms of polite conversation or being marked as a traitor, but I find living with such cognitive dissonance fatiguing. It is like watching a train-wreck in slow motion, without being allowed to scream.

* * * * *

But really—why am I still here? I now ask myself that question daily. There are obvious reasons—I have a family, a house, a job. My husband is an invalid. He cannot move. I am a creature of habits. I am risk averse. I have been very reluctant to seek other academic jobs. Like most women and minorities in the academe, I too have imposter syndrome. I feel that I am a failure, that I am undeserving. Or, to put it differently, I believe that I am fortunate to have what I have—given the tragedies and struggles that most people I know have lived through—and should therefore not jinx it by asking for more, or for some better, nicer elsewhere if such elsewhere even exists.

Yet—I must also confess—I like some aspects of my professional life.

I teach at a large public university, which many students attend for free or at low (by US standards) tuition costs. I teach courses that I have designed—on culture and world politics, art and war, feminist political economy, divided cities, race and IR. I love my students, who come from all over the world and from all walks of life. I cherish the safe space of the classroom, diversity of opinions, and the conversations we have. I admire my students' drive, desire to learn, and dedication to public service. Together, we open worlds and access places which I sometimes fear to breach even with friends.

And, similarly, I like aspects of living in the US. I cherish anonymity. I marvel at the access to politicians and bureaucrats that US citizens take for granted. I am an immigrant, and I find it comforting to be in a country where so many others are immigrants also. I feel deeply invested in the back-and-forth banter among millions of us, attempting to transform the US for the better, to live up to its potential despite all its faults. Most countries in Europe would have never given me the confidence to participate in their politics to the same degree.

And all that I love about the US, all that I have made peace with despite perpetual wars, is now poised to disappear. Thus, I ask myself daily—why am I still here?

* * * * *

I grew up in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was a part of the Ottoman Empire for nearly five centuries. The Ottoman practice of snatching Christian children to educate them in the service of the Empire—*devshirme*—was very common in the Balkans. Several Bosnian viziers were products of *devshirme*. Many others returned to their homeland as lower functionaries or soldiers.

I have often thought of the US higher education system as a modern-day variation on *devshirme*. American universities have long been a magnet for foreign graduate students. Advanced degrees obtained at US universities could offer a path to socio-economic mobility, often foreclosed in countries of origin. Well-structured and funded (even if just at the bare minimum of survival), graduate school is also an important site of acculturation of immigrants to the US, and of initiation into the small and cliquish world of academic manners, norms, and hierarchies.

The room for dissent within this world is minimal, as its boundaries are regulated both by the US immigration policies and by the habitus of the academe itself.

Since the end of the Cold War, while the US was leading and shaping the dynamics of globalization, knowledge economy—and standardization of knowledge—have been the key components of American power. Anglo-American universities have themselves turned into global enterprises, akin to multinational corporations, with campuses sprouting around the world and increasingly dependent on tuition paid by international students at home. Since the US academic market has also changed, with fewer and fewer tenure-track positions and an ever-expanding precariat, graduate programs have turned to foreign students to keep themselves afloat and fulfil their teaching and research staffing needs at low levels of pay. The number—and the percentage—of foreign graduate students in the US has been steadily increasing: from 218,000 in 1999/2000 to 502,000 in 2023/24. Foreign graduate students—from India, China, sub-Saharan Africa—now dominate international enrolments in the US and represent 27% of the total graduate population. In some fields, especially in sciences and engineering, foreign students are the absolute norm, with few—if any—US students at all.

It is difficult to see oneself in structural patterns, especially in a profession that promotes individualism and originality, and prides itself on measuring accomplishments through merit, rankings, and research outputs. But I have, indeed, been a part of the pattern—of the massive draw of international students into the US's academic orbit, and of the great global academic migration. My movements across borders—invitations to conferences, fellowships, sojourns at other academic institutions—have rested on assumptions of universal mobility, even when I was denied visas, taken off airplanes, stopped at checkpoints, and threatened by deportations. My education was supposed to be a recourse even in those circumstances when I was simply a refugee, a migrant. Especially in the eyes of my colleagues, any immigration difficulties that I encountered, including asylum proceedings, were not a cause for concern, such was their belief in the power of 'academic migrants' to overcome all legal obstacles.

The 2nd Trump Administration is actively destroying that widespread belief in the magic power of 'academic migrants'. The threats (and

executions) of deportations on US university campuses and detentions of foreign researchers arriving in the US are making it obvious how precarious our position really is. We are just the effects of the empire, says my friend Naeem Inayatullah. Thus, even when we are doing its bidding, we are not safe.

* * * * *

This morning, I installed a bird feeder in my backyard. The feeder has a camera and is linked to an app on the phone. People around the world are connected through this app, exchanging pictures of birds on their feeders.

I scroll through pictures as I am having coffee and chatting with my husband. The weather is beautiful in Florida at this time of the year. The yard is peaceful. The news from Washington, from Sarajevo, from Kyiv, from Gaza is terrifying. I look for more birds. We should all be birds.

I am no longer certain that I will be able to teach the courses I usually teach. I worry about the PhD students I work with, their future, the loss of mobility that they were hoping for. I am afraid that, as a naturalized US citizen, I might be stripped of all my rights. I would not be surprised if, like my mother, I had to start my life all over again in some strange land. I am certain that wars will find me. Given the injustices that have made my migrant life possible, that would only be fair.

I have been living in the United States for more than three decades. I have never settled. And now I know that I never will.

For more on being a migrant academic in alienating political environments, read Ahmed, Aizada, Anonymous, and Tereza in this volume.

For more on the US academic context, read Aizada, Julio, Farinaz, Shilpa, Ila, and Victoria in this volume.

For more by scholars from (Western) Balkans, read Apostolos Andrikopoulos, 'Becoming White?', in Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023), pp. 105–16, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.11>; Bojan Savić, "'A Small Plot of New Land at All Times': A Narrative of a Vulnerability Mortified", in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe*, pp. 129–36, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.13>; Dragana Stojmenovska, 'Of Academia, Status, and Knowing Your Place', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 51–60, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.06>; Mihnea Tănăsescu, 'Unlearning', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 21–30, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.03>; Vjosa Musliu, 'Have You Ever Heard of British Hospitality? Neither Have I', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 83–94, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.09>

9. Trauma, Ancestry, and Friendship during Graduate Education and Their Aftermaths

Julio César Díaz Calderón

This chapter discusses themes of trauma, genocide, and suicide.

Living in American Academia

Dear Aida,

I never said thank you.

Dear Aida,

I never said your words occupied the empty spaces of drifting
academic dreams.

Dear Aida,

I said you intimidated me until I realized the thing that
intimidated me was your honesty.

Dear Aida,

Was your honesty intimidating or was the encounter with
another?

Dear Aida,

I and I, *Tú eres yo, tātou tātou.*

Dear Aida,

I don't know what emotions mean, but I feel that gratitude is
what I feel for you.

Dear Aida,

Gratitude and love are entwined like those thoughts that come
when bodies can't come.

Dear Aida,

Are we better than those people that sold our cultures for tenure?

Dear Aida,

I seem to be unable to run from the places you said I should know, but that I don't want to know.

Dear Aida,

I am afraid of the common places because I never leave places without traces, and I don't want those settling roads over my body.

Dear Aida,

Manuela urges me to resist, you force me to resist resistance for some kind of resistance for my unresisting soul.

Dear Aida,

What is left of you when you are empty spaces with gratitude words on heart-shaped scars?

Dear Aida,

What is left of our soul after the selling for (the) tenure of our bodies?

Dear Aida,

Is it you or is it me?

Dear Aida,

Who cannot teach who?

Dear Aida,

I can only give you words for empty spaces.

Dear Aida,

Words for words.

As a migrant, my non-assimilation politics deter me from translating the non-English words in my poems. Take a dictionary! Google them! Make of yourself a dictionary of healing/fighting words! This poem was first published as part of a conversation with Aida A. Hozic (Edkins et al., 2021).

Doing Poetry Together

Gainesville, Florida, USA, 8 March 2021

Two friends, colleagues, and mentors—Aida A. Hozic and Manuela Lavinás Picq—helped me weave the verses of ‘Living in American Academia’. They are migrant academics of International Relations (IR) at universities in the United States. I view them as leading voices in the fight against capitalist dispossession, ethnic divisions, heteronormativity, imperialism, nationalism, settler colonialism, sexism, and racism—both within the field of International Relations and beyond. This resonates deeply with me, as I often find myself at the intersection of these oppressions as an autistic, queer, racialized poet-activist-scholar, born and raised in Oaxaca, a periphery of the periphery that Mexico represents in the context of IR. However, the fact that our academic identities are tied to a discipline dominated by Eurocentric approaches and US-based voices should signal our lack of innocence. We make compromises to navigate and survive in such spaces.

When I reflect on pursuing graduate education in the USA, I think about the traumas we carried before arriving, the ones we developed while there, and the ones that linger long after we have left. Trauma is a response to violence that disrupts our understanding of ourselves, our place in the world, and how the world operates. It can overwhelm our bodies, slow our thinking, make us forget the hard-won tools and strengths we have gained, and push us to seek refuge in violent homes we reluctantly accept out of an almost irrational fear.

Perhaps trauma is not the most accurate term. Trauma got popularized from a particular Western historical security moment. One of my mentors, Alison Howell, first taught me how the concept of trauma initially referred to physical injuries—wounds to the body—but later expanded to include emotional and psychological experiences (2012, 215). This shift occurred after observing that experiencing or witnessing traumatic events could lead to symptoms resembling what was known then as hysteria. Yet, the diagnostic classification of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) firmly established trauma as a psychiatric disorder, a development shaped by the politically charged aftermath of the Vietnam War in the United States.

I recall further reading about how trauma plays a role in both sustaining and challenging systems of oppression. For instance, Alison Howell (2012, 215) insisted on how ‘the invention of PTSD and its application to veterans positioned them not as perpetrators in wartime, but as victims’. Meanwhile, Vanessa Pupavac (2002, 490) has critiqued international psychosocial interventions in post-conflict zones, arguing they can act as a form of cultural imperialism by imposing Western therapeutic models on societies with their own coping strategies. Still, I will accept the term trauma here as a starting point to go somewhere else.

Aida A. Hozic began her undergraduate studies in theatre in Belgrade, then part of Yugoslavia, while her home was in Sarajevo, also within the same state. She wrote once about witnessing the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the subsequent war as a stateless graduate student living in the United States (Hozic, 2016, 70).

In the summer of 1991, her passport was stolen. She refused to obtain a replacement from the Yugoslav Embassy in Washington, as the passports issued at the time included a Serbian code. Accepting such a passport would have made it difficult for her to prove her Bosnian citizenship after the war (Hozic, 2014, 2-3).

Reflecting on the ‘unnecessary deaths’ of her past, she described the banality of survival as a scholar of ‘domestic and foreign affairs’ at the University of Florida (Hozic, 2016, 71). Today, the city where she studied theatre and the city that she once called home belong to two different countries.

Aida explained that she left theatre studies because she ‘did not like working with actors, expressing [herself] through other people, manipulating them, or persuading them to do what [she] had envisioned’ (Hozic, 2016, 67). I engaged in dialogue with Aida about my writing while she encouraged me to explore her vision of IR in the classroom. I was, in a sense, performing her tragedy, International Relations Theory.

Our collaboration took place primarily through email. She became almost like a co-adviser to me and was the only person in academia with whom I coauthored and completed scholarship during my time as a graduate student at the University of Florida.

‘Dear Aida’ emerged as a ritual of connection in a virtual territory, born from the everyday relational practices of sharing academic ideas. She was

an excellent mentor, grounding me in ways I wasn't yet ready to accept.

We often disagreed over email, partly due to the inherent misunderstandings of written communication without the social cues of face-to-face interaction. Additionally, we self-censored, mindful of the constraints of public university email systems. Florida's 'Sunshine Laws', which grant public access to records such as emails, text messages, and other electronic communications, added to our cautiousness. We tended to find more agreement in face-to-face, off-the-record conversations.

When I met Manuela, I was grappling with how Queer IR scholarship could be translated into the political actions, silences, practices, lives, and sovereignties of or for the peripheries of IR's conceptions of the international. I first reached out to Manuela while drafting my responses to white Queer IR scholarship. Over the years, we have exchanged countless emails, Skype calls, WhatsApp messages, and shared numerous papers and books. In an unexpected alliance, our ivies grew roots together in fertile soil, starting from the soil of our bodies (Díaz Calderón, 2021b).

The previous sentence often provokes anxiety in those accustomed to associating love or bodily interactions in academia with sexual harassment or abuses of power. However, when I speak of how our bodies, not just our ideas, nurture each other, I am exploring possibilities of care, love ethics, and embodied responses rooted in friendship, academic connections, and shared struggles for liberation. Through my conversations with Manuela, I learned that a loving friend, even after seemingly banal academic exchanges, can find the words to soothe your body and ease the occasional despair caused by traumatic experiences within and beyond academia.

From my early conversations with Manuela about engaging with whiteness, I have only managed to publish a few articles in Spanish that emulate the writing style of Queer IR. These articles combine Queer IR methodologies with Latin American queer scholarship to explore the global politics of sexuality and sovereignty in Latin America (Díaz Calderón, 2018, 2019). Instead, I write alongside Manuela—in Spanish, in English, and across continents. She is a constant presence, embodying calls to 'resist!', 'decolonize!', and 'go back to the land!' (Díaz Calderón, 2021a, 2021b).

Manuela entered American graduate education to escape the fear of the sky that lingered in her body after her boyfriend's paragliding crash in the Alps (Picq, 2016, 39). Throughout her PhD and for years after, she longed to leave and return to the sky. Yet, the land rooted her in unexpected places— from Chimborazo to Quito, from Amazonia to Massachusetts, and, eventually, from exile to her mother's arms.

Sometimes, I think it was the sound of the ocean waves that saved her but could not save me. I was stranded in the middle of Florida, unable to travel across the state—first due to my inability to drive and later because of the isolation imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. At other times, I wonder if it was her ability to practice care through sex (Picq, 2016). My own body and sexual practices often failed to align with the desirable aesthetics of my local, radical, and casual spaces for seeking sexual connections.

Most of the time, I believe Manuela is saving me. I share all my academic poems with her, especially the devastating ones. She responds most often to those.

This poem is a testament to my interactions with Aida in Gainesville—a reflection on the collective tools we developed through our shared struggles and conflicts. I realized I can only write when my words feel capable of filling empty spaces. I also came to understand how my colonial, masculine, and religious upbringing often obstructed meaningful conversations.

At first, she was intimidating (Agathangelou and Ling, 2002). Over time, I began to see her in a more relational way: 'I and I' and '*tātou tātou*' (Shilliam, 2015). When I saw her as me, '*tú eres yo*' (Díaz Calderón, 2019)—I came to understand that any distortion I project onto her is a reflection of my own. Also, I accepted that I am (an IR scholar), even if I do not fit into her idea of how I am supposed to be (one). I confronted this truth in one talk with Aida. I had tears streaming down my face; yet, I knew I would have continued imposing fiction onto her realities until I surrendered my need to define and know her. Now, I am learning to listen and foster genuine dialogue.

Although I aspire to truly listen, I know I will never 'master' it. Listening requires ongoing practice and is never truly complete—trauma often obstructs the process. Trauma compels me to confront the

difficult question posed by Chicana activist and writer Cherrie Moraga: Am I, too, an oppressor? Is my intimidation rooted in the same fear an oppressor feels when discovering 'the same aches, the same longings as those of the people he has shitted on' (Moraga, 2002, p. 30)? Have I ever shitted on people like her? '[T]here is no easy way around these emotions' (Moraga, 2002, p. 31).

I hope I have learned to 'look at the nightmare within' myself and to grasp that 'the oppression of others hurts [me] personally' (Moraga, 2002, 31). I aspire to be better equipped to confront the oppressor within, even as hopelessness lingers nearby.

Uncertainty can feel exhilarating when experienced through the lens of love. Gratitude words transformed into love affirmations between us, conveyed through poetry and narratives shared in academic journals, conferences, and university panels. Loving (for) fighting, loving (in) resistance, love (to) survive(s) the hateful times.

I see affects as forces that bind people together and inspire movement—binding to move, moving to bind. Speaking and writing about love enables us to challenge the narratives of danger and insecurity we are taught to associate with one another and with the Other.

This poem brought a soothing dynamic to our academic relationship. We now use 'words for words' when exchanging texts that resonate deeply with our hearts. We hold each other accountable against commodifying our cultures or bodies. It is a curious form of accountability—I have a fondness for theory and methods, while she, with the security of tenure, has the freedom to experiment more boldly with her academic writing.

I know why the narrative chapter where she revealed her story about the 'banality of surviving' the Bosnian genocide in the US impacted me so profoundly. I am intimately familiar with the banality of surviving wayward comrades back home, especially as I was being 'bought off with subsidized apartments' (Hojić, 2016, 70) by modern nation-states that claim to be singular nations.

Dear Aida,
I never said thank you.
Dear Aida,
Thank you.

From Trauma Bonding to Honouring our Ancestral Bodies, Lands, and Food

Oaxaca de Juarez, Mexico, 8 March, 2025

Dear Aida,

I remember my first full day in Sarajevo—it was a Monday. After enjoying an amazing breakfast at a local restaurant just around the corner from my Airbnb, I set out to find a SIM card so I could have data during my week-long stay. I had searched Google Maps beforehand and found a shop, but when I got to the location, it either no longer existed or was somewhere nearby but hard to find. With no data, I decided to just keep walking and trust that I'd figure it out.

Eventually, I came across a big mall and managed to get a Bosnian phone number. You were the first person I messaged with my new data plan, and I sent you photos of all the sweets I'd bought from the candy shop near the mall's entrance. I had become obsessed with Turkish delights (*loukoumi*) during my time in Greece, so I was thrilled to see so many different flavours in Sarajevo. There, they're called *rahat lokum*. I decided to take a break in the Veliki park right in front of the mall. There, I tried my first coconut-and-cherry *rahat lokum*—it was amazing.

After my sweet break, I went on the 'essentials' tour you suggested. First, I walked up Koševo Street and got a coffee at a nice Italian coffee shop full of students. Then, I headed over to Alipašina Street to check out the supermarket and the drugstore. Unfortunately, the kiosk with that amazing rotisserie chicken you recommended was out, so I couldn't grab any. But I did pick up two bureks and what you called 'a Bosnian-style apple pie'. That's about all I could fit in before getting back to my remote data analyst job.

That day grounded me after days of deep pain. I'm still not entirely sure what I was grieving. The most obvious reason was my failure to get a South African visa. I couldn't apply for it at any embassy except one in the country of my passport or where I was a permanent resident. By the time I realized this, I was already in India, a month into my 'field' research.

I'd gotten confused because Mexico was listed as one of the countries

exempt from needing a visa—but it turned out that applied only to diplomatic passports, not regular ones. By the time I realized I needed a visa, I had already bought non-refundable flights, made research contacts in Johannesburg, planned workshops, and booked an Airbnb. Everything was set. And yet, the borders rose up, and it all fell apart.

With no other option, I decided to spend my savings and spend a few weeks in Europe—where Mexicans don't need a visa—while waiting for my next events in the UK. Some friends tried to help me get the South African visa, and I fought hard with the embassies. Still, I remember one friend laughing at my sadness, pointing out the irony of me complaining about staying in Europe while so many people risk their lives trying to get there.

I started in Greece, looking for an affordable refuge by the beach. The sea almost always soothes my pain. But this time, it didn't. Even as I watched the breathtaking sunsets in Athens, I was still suicidal. During that time, I wrote this small poem:

My hair rolls over a Greek shoreline.

And with these Black curls,
the burden lightens,
The clouds drift away,
and words begin to ripen.

'I'm healing', I said.
'What are you healing from?'
she replied.

'I'll tell you later,
off the record—
if you can find me alive'.
I thought to send it,
but never did.

After finishing the poem, I kept returning to a paper I once wrote in the form of a letter to you. It was about suicide in canonical texts within Black Feminisms in the US, written during my time as a PhD student in Florida. I haven't published the paper, but it holds the lived stories of Black Feminist mentors—stories that haunt me every time I find myself

at a suicidal edge.

One of those stories is Mildred Maud Fisher's suicide. She was the mother of June Jordan, one of the founding mothers of Black Feminist Studies. In her poem 'Ah, Momma', June wrote about the loss of her mother's dream of being 'an artist: someone... who could just boldly go and sit near the top of a hill and watch the setting of the sun'. June resolved, 'I would, one day, prove myself to be, in fact, your daughter' (Jordan, 2007, 194-195). I'm not as bold as June to prove myself in that way, but I can aspire to keep Mildred Maud Fisher's dream alive.

In Sarajevo, I thought of Mildred Maud Fisher every day. Each day, I took a moment to pause—to watch the river, admire the sunsets, observe people passing by, or enjoy the incredible food and coffee. Each moment felt like intergenerational healing.

I also thought of you, and imagined being with you. I wondered what our conversations might be like, stripped of the noise of our academic entanglements.

I often find myself thinking of my suicidal self when I reflect on my time as a student in the US. That feeling also surfaces whenever I encounter yet another form of 'systemic oppression' I have to overcome—or maybe not. Maybe I could just rest.

After that trip, I returned to Mexico, stopping in Austria, the United Kingdom, and the US along the way. Unfortunately, when I arrived in Mexico City, I was robbed in the cab from the airport to the Airbnb where I was planning to stay for a week. They took my travel bag, which held my Mexican passport, my US visa, and some cash. The thing that hurt the most, though, was losing my copy of Nenad Veličković's *Sahib*.

I remember texting you from a library in Bosnia as I browsed the shelves, trying to decide which books to buy. You suggested I get *Sahib* because it wasn't something I could just order on Amazon—as it was published by a Bosnian press.

I later joked that the robbery happened because, for the first time in years, I felt truly accomplished and at ease during my flight from Orlando to Mexico City. It followed a night spent in a luxury hotel, where I allowed myself a rare moment of peace. I remember posting on Facebook a photo of me by the hotel's pool, with some of the items that were stolen: the Austrian fan inspired by Moctezuma's headdress, the Colombian travel coffee mug, and the books.

While this letter might seem a bit scattered so far, it does have a point. Trauma comes and goes. Yet, when it feels unbearable, the friendships, ancestries, tools, and experiences you've gathered over time seem to rise up and help you survive.

One of those unbearable days happened a few weeks ago when a dear friend told me she's beginning the process of an assisted transition to the other side. Living with an incurable illness, battling every single day just to stay alive, had become harder for her than the thought of letting go. Her decision stirred something deep in me.

This friend, now facing euthanasia, was the one who mentored me as I began writing about neurodiversity in Spanish. She was also the person who once asked me, 'What are you healing from?' after I posted a photo in Greece saying I was healing. She didn't know I felt like I was failing at healing.

As I worked through my emotions, I returned to this poem I'd started sometime after Sarajevo:

To Mildred Maud Fisher

Your dream was to rest,
waiting for another sunset—
free from the worries
of income and bills,
but full of something
I can't quite name.

I invite you here—
a sagging couch on one side,
worn down by the many
morning-afters,
suicide scar(e)s.

Hold my hand,
to stop the drive
to follow her
and you
hasta el fondo.

My dear,
decades have passed
since you saw our big dream
realized—
with me, through you, in us—
over a wooden chair
by this lake
some say
is full of alligators.

Sit by me—
let us enjoy
what we've earned
and cry
that we needed
to pay.

What's left, I wonder,
of the past,
and what's to come?
The Oaxacan river,
dried in winter,
and I held my promise
to return,
again and again,
to the pink bougainvillea.

Days later after finishing the poem and months after returning to Mexico, I found out that my US visa reapplication, which I submitted after the robbery, had been denied. The news came on the day I left Mexico City again, planning to stop in Oaxaca for just one day. My plan was simple: swap bags, eat a *tlayuda*, and then head to the US.

The rejection hit me hard. It meant I couldn't attend the International Studies Association Annual Conference in Chicago, where I was scheduled to speak at five events and reconnect with so many academic friends, including you. It also put at risk the \$2,000 honorarium I was set to earn at a one-day conference organized by my dear friend K. Melchor Quick Hall at Wellesley College in Boston the following week after the

Conference. As you know, that money is essential for my activist work with Marika and the Trans* people in Latin America. Losing it made me so angry that I threw myself into writing my unfinished drafts, including this letter/chapter.

Strangely, the rejection also brought a sense of relief. I didn't truly want to go. Like many Mexican migrants, my trips to the US are often driven by necessity—money or career advancement. In my case, I fly there to give lectures, run workshops, conduct research, secure grants, or even just because I find a cheaper flight to somewhere else with a stop there. Sure, I also go there to visit friends and relatives. Yet, in those cases, I wish we could meet somewhere else... with better food.

Unable to leave, I reached out to a nonbinary Ayuuk friend, letting them know I'd be back in Oaxaca for a few months. My friend runs a community kitchen where I've volunteered on and off for the past three years. Last Wednesday, we shared a cup of Oaxacan chocolate, *yema* bread, and guacamole with grasshoppers on a beautiful terrace. As we watched the sunset, we talked about activist projects and possible grants to help the kitchen survive. We decided to apply for a US grant on love media activism that a friend had sent me weeks ago.

We also planned a series of work sessions to standardize data and document the lessons learned from the kitchen's years of feeding transit migrants passing through Oaxaca on their way to the US. Next week, we'll have three sessions, each three hours long, to start the process. It's less poetic than I would like, but the visa rejection made me keep my promise to return to Oaxaca and serve my communities here.

As I edited the poems in this letter, I thought:

My ancestors
Relate through survival
Not by bloodlines

This feels like a fitting way to end. I hope we can meet again soon... hopefully in Sarajevo with klepe and Havanna cake.

A hug, and always love,

J.

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10. Four Seasons of Being a Migrant Academic

Xin Pan

The inspiration for writing this piece in the form of four seasons comes from a Japanese movie *Little Forest* that I really like. The film depicts the everyday life of a young woman living on her own in a village where she was born and grew up; the pictures of the film present the changing scenery of four seasons. Forest in various colours, sunshine in different temperatures... Living in response to nature and the environment, stories emerge. According to the director, it is intentional that the film starts in Summer, goes through Autumn and Winter, and ends in Spring, because Spring is the season where hope sprouts. Touched by this, I have decided to leave the piece of writing in Spring with you, wishing it bears witness of possible hope. The season resonates with the time when each story took place. My stories here, however, are not narrated in a linear time sequence: the essay starts in Autumn, then jumps to Summer, and goes by Winter before reaching Spring. Comprehension of one's life is never in a linear temporal framework, although mainstream society requires us to narrate ourselves in such a way. Self-understanding always requires *to and fro* movement that contains here and there, before and now; and they co-exist simultaneously in our body. Happenings here attend to our past there; our yesterday entangles with our today, contributing to thinking about our tomorrow. Life itself is never linear. We need stories that grasp such non-linear complexity.

By writing in four seasons, I want to present the everyday life and the omnipresence of moments of realizing myself being a migrant that crosses all seasons of a year. At the same time, by not following the

sequence of seasons, I would like to show the messiness and also the epiphany of understanding one's life.

Welcome to my four seasons.

Autumn

I still remember how enthusiastic I was when offered my current full-time job in a PhD program in the UK. Before the offer, I had lived in Belgium for almost three years, supporting myself as a self-funded PhD researcher by working as a research assistant in multiple short-term projects to make a living. I was tired of trying to manage all the projects in hand: at the peak time, there were three projects that I was intensely working on at the same period. Jumping between various literatures, languages, and topics, sometimes the brain was uncontrollably confused. I couldn't wait to be employed for a little bit longer (three years) to have a break from constantly worrying about income. After years of having part-time jobs, I had a rosy imagination of being paid to 'just do a PhD' and working with other colleagues in a department. Whenever an email from somebody who had a signature indicating the research project that they were working on came into my mailbox, I wondered how it would feel like for them: 'it must be very empowering to work in a community', I thought. I wished I could also send emails with a signature. I wanted to belong to a multi-year research project that implies some stability. A sense of belonging, yes; it is what I have been longing for.

I moved to Europe in 2019 to do research on/with queer migrants. My current research examines the solidarity experiences of queer women or non-binary migrants of colour living in a provincial city other than Metropolitan cities, where imaginations of queer life usually take place. I answer how the forms of solidarity practice respond to their transnational migrating trajectory and geopolitics and how local and global racial discourses and sexual politics take shape in the course of solidarity-making practices. In 2019, I left the queer community in China that had deeply resided in my heart for many years. Having volunteered and worked part-time in a local LGBTQ organization, the involvement has taught me what it is to actively engage in activism, to work with people who share similar political aspirations, to support and be supported by a queer community, which is seen as non-existent

by many of the people I have encountered in Europe. Questions about how it is possible to do activism on queer issues in China are constantly thrown at me in various contexts. In an extreme scenario, I was asked this question *five times in one afternoon* when attending a gathering of a local LGBTQ organization in Belgium. People noticed the only Asian woman sitting in the crowd, and guess what? She was born and raised in authoritarian China. Unbelievable.

At the beginning, when people came to the question, I eagerly told them the details of our work and the strategies we mobilized in order to survive. Similar questions popped up when I talked to the second group of people; I answered them again, but time was limited, so I left some details out. Then the third group came, it was the identical question, I was already a bit tired and not enthusiastic anymore in terms of telling people about our strategies. At this point, I noticed that I developed a narrative and a sequence of sentences to answer this question: 'Yes, there is LGBTQ activism in China. → The work has been done from various angles that concern the community. → There is no explicit legal restriction but also no protection towards homosexual acts/relationships and trans people; LGBTQ work is in a grey area where the boundary of what can be done and what cannot is always shifting. → There are grassroots organizations in capital cities of most of the provinces in China. → It is indeed difficult with the authorities but it doesn't mean there is no space at all. → Activists would have to spend quite a lot of energy to deal with/negotiate with local authorities, and the negotiation sometimes reaches a common ground and holds space for survival and keeping the work going, although it could mean that the work has to be conducted in another shape...' Before people of the fourth and fifth group opened their mouth, I already knew their questions. And at that moment, I wasn't sure if it was me, a person with a caring soul, or just my body automatically and mechanically reacting to what I already expected.

I think I lost passion in explaining a situation where queers from the Global South are seen as backward and alienated, with pity in the eyes of some people I met. Most likely, the comment from them would be: 'You are so brave (to work in such political environment)!' I am not particularly glad to hear such comments. Because by saying that, other than focusing on and seeing people who are working against

the authority, the emphasis of the framing itself is simultaneously giving credit to the overarching control of the regime. This comment is reinforcing and reproducing its power. The authoritarian governing is undoubtedly the backdrop, but we need no more such reiteration. We've had enough. I don't see myself as *brave*, I have fears quite often, especially thinking about how the actions I take may have unsettling influence on my family and the ones I love. I thought of the mobile phone apps that I immediately deleted after use (e.g., the app for renewing my passport abroad), and those countless moments of being alert about what message to send on which apps, worrying about possible surveillance and censorship. It is not bravery that drove my actions: it is a necessity for living that smells of hope. I'd rather hear something like 'These are such smart strategies that you collectively came up with'. Also, in such conversations, I could sense a danger of not seeing or not being able to see how close authoritarianism is when people assume it as something far away, something that could only exist in 'Other' places, something that democratic Europe is immune to.

I have attended events organised by LGBTQ organizations in Europe not only for my own research on/with queer migrants, but also for gaining a sense of belonging. I was familiar with such a feeling, and I had grown in it. At the time between 2013 to 2019, when I was engaging in activism in a city called Guangzhou in China, many LGBTQ organizations were thriving there (and now it's another scenario through the past years of stronger hostile political control over unauthorized civil society organizations in general). Activists work on different issues that queer people face in their everyday life (to name a few, school bullying, family/friend relationship, HIV and sexual health, etc.). Contrary to the invisibility of the activism to mainstream media and society, as well as to the Global North, for me the practice of queer activism itself was hyper visible, and it was my exact life. I didn't expect to repeat this many times about what my life was like when relocating to Europe. I thought queer people would have more in common than not, and I was looking forward to being a member of an organization that would facilitate me to cultivate a similar sense of belonging as before, as the time when I was in Guangzhou.

What gets cultivated, however, sadly but also thankfully, is a deeper understanding that queerness is not universal and history should be

multiple as *histories*. I certainly didn't feel belonging during and after the abovementioned event: I was exhausted. Exhaustion shielded my excitement of attending a widely promoted LGBTQ event and meeting a group of young queer people in public venue: Was I more used to engaging in queer activism in the shadows? I questioned myself. Through these years, I've learnt (and am still learning) not to pursue the similar sense of belonging that I had experienced in Guangzhou. I am still longing for it, and hopefully when the elements are more tangible for such a sense of belonging to sprout, I would still be able to feel it. But for now, I try to notice and collect fragments of belonging that emerge in various places and are attached to individuals who understand a fraction of what I'm going through. It is not a holistic approach, but a temporal and spatial one; an approach that counts for survival.

Along the (ongoing) everyday journey of migration, *people of colour* is a new label that I came across and picked up as a piece of equipment for thinking. When I was living in China, it was the authoritarian regime that I mainly had to negotiate with, except for the same old difficulties that queer women may navigate in terms of patriarchy and complicated relationships with their families. Since moving to Europe, however, my own existence as a racialized being is some mystery that I have been forced to urgently cope with because of its omnipresence. How has it impacted my life? And how does the history of racialization inform my today and every day?

I am not *just* (seen as) a queer woman anymore.

Summer

I took the job offer and moved to the UK. It didn't take long before I realized that my expectation of a sense of belonging in the institution was more of a hallucination.

I do have a signature now. Underneath the emails I send out is a link to the research project I am working on, rather than an empty space with only my name, the name that seems to be confusing for some people, including a principal investigator of a project I worked for before, a white guy who interviewed me and recruited me himself. During the one and a half years that we worked together, every now and then he would call me by my surname, despite hundreds of emails we exchanged

that were signed with my name and our monthly video calls with each other. It would be less suspicious if the miscalling was consistent, and the inconsistency just has to leak the seemingly well-hidden disrespect. I also have an affiliation now, which I could use to fill in forms when participating in a conference and other networking events. The affiliation indicates that I am not an ‘independent researcher’ anymore—although I’d like to think that all researchers *should be* independent, not only academically but also wishfully free from manipulation and censorship.

Censorship and self-censorship, I once naively associated only with life under authoritarian and totalitarian political regimes. But self-censoring is actually playing a role in this piece of writing, it is with me when thinking about what to write and during the process of putting down the words. The self-censoring is not coming from my ongoing connections with people living in a place governed by an authoritarian political party, but because of my current position as a PhD researcher *within* the institution. What story can be told and written about, whom can the story be shown to or not, what consequences the story may bring along... I am not able to just write down whatever I would like to: I am sure this resonates with some of the readers. Like treading on thin ice (in Chinese: 如履薄冰, *rúlǚbóbīng*), it is the carefulness and high sensitivity we have to put in *every single step* that implies our precariousness as migrants in academia.

During my first summer in the UK, a friend from Belgium came to visit after my relocation. Two beers in my belly, I told her some of the struggles that I was experiencing at that time. She looked me in the eyes sincerely, saying: ‘You obviously do not look happy here; why don’t you just quit the job?’ I choked with speechlessness and wasn’t sure if I should pinpoint the reality that I *could not* just quit. I could not quit because the job was the only reason why I am allowed to stay in this country; without the job, I wouldn’t have a visa to be either in the UK or go to Belgium. I could not ‘just quit’ a struggling job like she could do as a Belgian citizen. This obvious but also oblivious difference is not always visible to many people.

The friend’s visit caught me at my most difficult time. The first summer after I started the project, with a series of overwhelming happenstances in the institution (which included the visa application being rejected to enter Belgium, the place I once called home), I lost my

capability to articulate—to verbalize what has happened to me, how I felt, and what I might be able to do to get out of the swamp. This wasn't a state of myself that I am familiar with. Usually, I am the one who helps friends to articulate; leading the dialogue, I am often able to facilitate them talking about their feelings and finding a way out of the pending circumstance. Working in the field of LGBTQ activism under rigorous surveillance, we were constantly provided with training sessions organized by other experienced activists and facilitators about dealing with trauma through naming our emotions and meditation practice. This time, however, the state of not being able to articulate fell on me, unexpectedly. Maybe the damage amplifies when the reality clashes with the rosy imagination I hold.

Clogged, my pores struggled to breathe.

I felt stuck in a sticky and dark swamp; I tried to climb up with all the energy left, only to sink in deeper. It was horrifying. I feared being in the swamp forever; time in the swamp seemed to lose limitation, endless.

It was a very warm summer. For a couple of days in a row it was over thirty-five degrees, which was quite unusual for the UK. I came back from the trip with the abovementioned friend, only to see that all the plants at home were unhappy, the plants that are at the core of my home-making practice. The leaves of a fern—evergreen maidenhair—dried out and became crunchy. My heart sank the immediate moment when the scene came into my view: I was guilty about leaving the plant alone for the journey, at the same time, hit by the manifest metaphor that its current state represented my own mental state.

When life was enveloped in suffocation, I used to cry. It is my coping mechanism—I lock myself at home, alone, and let myself cry; afterward usually I was able to go out again and face the world. I need that moment of crying on my own, unruly. Yet because of the happenstances in the workplace, along with my articulating capability, my tears also disappeared. In silence, somebody came to my head. It was a homeless friend (if he allows me to call him that), an asylum seeker from Afghanistan in Belgium. At the time when we met each other at Antwerp Central Station, he had lost his job in a restaurant because of the Covid-19 pandemic and lived in the streets while seeking legal status to stay. When a friend and I paid him visits, every time he would talk in his limited English and Flemish, with a smile and proud,

showing us the pictures of his family, daughters, and wife who were still in Afghanistan and who he didn't tell about losing his job and living in the street. After I moved to the UK, the other friend kept going to see him with some snacks, also after he decided to move to (the streets of) Brussels to seek asylum. Two years in, the friend told me that the last time when she saw him in Brussels, he was very silent. With a destroyed look on his face, he did not talk to her. The friend worried that he might be thinking about giving up, mentally and physically. When thinking of him, it is by no means to compare our situation, in which mine seems to be light as a feather now. But all of a sudden, I could sympathize with that thick silence he carries, the silence that attributes itself to traumatized experience and a world that refuses to listen.

My silence continued for about a month. How long will his last?

Every day, a zombie was getting up, feeding herself, soullessly working, going to sleep... it felt like watching somebody else performing all the actions from a distance. It wasn't my own life; I couldn't feel myself. At the end of August, one day, I was at home, pacing. Completely unexpectedly, I noticed two tiny leaves of the evergreen maidenhair grow out from the soil, surrounded by all the dried ones. Filled with hope and a strong message of resilience, it deeply touched my heart. Standing in front of the plant, I loudly cried and cried. Finally. Maybe I could recover as well, just like the evergreen maidenhair.

Slowly and slowly, maybe I could be back too. Word by word, I may be able to tell the story and the violence that I had experienced, to disentangle those that had hurt me profoundly yet seem to be 'normal' or even invisible to others. Bit by bit, I would be able to understand how the machine of the institution that generates and reproduces the pain came into being, and I look at it, I look at it righteously, without any self-hatred that it has tried to impose on me.

Winter

After a meeting in February 2024, it was confirmed that I would not be able to get my current British Skilled Worker Visa extended, nor be granted another one. The university would not (*be able to*, I was told) hire me for a longer time with the current salary not only because the project contract will be finished, but also because the salary is

abnormally 'too high' for a PhD researcher. To be grateful for that, rather than asking for more: I sensed the message circulated in the meeting. 'Some point is missed here', I thought in my head during the meeting: it is not me getting 'too much' salary (and not to argue from the aspect that extra work other than the PhD itself is required by the project), but an ordinary PhD researcher in the UK does not receive enough stipend. Usually, British scholarship grants successful applicants tuition fees at the UK rate, and international PhD researchers would need to pay the price difference that comes from international student tuition fees, which is three to four times higher than the fee for a domestic student (the fee depends on individual universities, some would be more than four times higher. For example, for 2024/2025 academic year, the domestic annual tuition fee for a social science full-time PhD program in a renowned university in London is £6,035, while the same program charges its international students £28,100. And this is not the highest tuition fee for a similar program in the UK I've seen). Without financial support from family or by other means, it would be impossible for a migrant PhD researcher in the UK to live a life solely depending on the amount of stipend they receive.

This year (2024), the threshold for issuing a Skilled Worker Visa has increased tremendously, along with the health surcharge fee that one needs to pay when applying for the visa. The threshold went from £26,200 to £38,700 annual gross income, while the health surcharge fee rose by 66% from £624 to £1,035. The amount of my current salary wouldn't be able to support me applying for a Skilled Worker Visa even if the university agreed to a new contract and visa sponsorship. It looks unavoidably that I will need to switch from the Skilled Worker Visa to a Student Visa, which gradually induces a sense of loss in me during the process.

Among international students in the UK, the Skilled Worker Visa has been seen as a better one than the Student Visa in terms of the benefits it brings. For example, people who hold a Skilled Worker Visa only need five years to be eligible to apply for permanent residency in the UK, and those who hold a Student Visa would need ten years. For most people who plan to gain permanent residency, a Skilled Worker Visa is a more efficient and therefore a better visa. Whenever I mention the visa switch issue to friends, they would sigh and say: 'What a pity! You've had three

years already and only need another two, then you'd be able to apply for permanent residency'.

A Skilled Worker Visa is also associated with capability, with resources to be mobilized—social capital, we'd say. A Skilled Worker Visa holder is someone to admire simply because it is more difficult to get than a Student Visa, which mostly would require enough money to settle. Having a Skilled Worker Visa means that an established institution, company, or organization is willing to sponsor this person and pay for the sponsor fee required by the Home Office. The visa implies local connections and networks. I was once told by a friend who also holds a Skilled Worker Visa that she didn't feel comfortable telling migrant Chinese businessmen about her visa type because they might ask for some favours that she wouldn't want to help with.

Looking back, I have always been a bit insensible about the visa matter. I have never planned my life aiming at permanent residency, and I am not updating myself on the latest news about immigration requirements like most of my migrant friends do. I think part of me disdains and rejects it, not towards the people who do so, but to the system itself. Although deeply intertwined, there is a resentment in me having to acknowledge my own entanglement with the system and play along. I have never been good at playing with the system, I usually turn my back to it. And because of that, it also takes revenge on me—making me 'lose' the perfect timing for immigration and make 'bad' life decisions.

It whispers to me about obeying and being a role model of good immigrant who follows the migration procedure as the pillar of life and benefits from it, and let it benefit as well. I am not listening, and my non-cooperation bears consequences. If I had listened, I might have already gained permanent residency in Belgium, the 'home' that later rejected me because the reason to enter wasn't strong enough and the sponsoring institution wasn't indicated clearly enough for people who held the power to control who gets to cross the border. The rejection letter felt like being slapped in the face and told: 'You thought this was your home? No, you don't get to decide where your home is. Having lived here for three years? No, your friendships and social connections mean nothing, and how do you even dare to anticipate they would increase the chance of you being granted the visa?' A Belgian friend was trying to figure out

the reason for the rejection with me, saying 'probably the immigration officer suspected you might be a Chinese spy'. If it were true, I'd be such an incompetent spy, being rejected already at the border and not capable of stealing the recipe of Belgian fries or beers.

When reaching out to switch the visa, the university visa team sent me an email, emphasizing that my Student Visa must be checked once a month in the library, if a monthly meeting is not held in person with the supervisor. British universities are complicit and have close contact with the Home Office, which is 'the lead government department for immigration and passports, drugs policy, crime, fire, counter-terrorism and police' (Home Office, 2024). International undergraduate and Master's degree students are constantly monitored by the university, whose attendances are registered through digital card readers in teaching classrooms. For migrant PhD researchers, the surveillance implicates and draws supervisors and other university staff members into border policing.

Some people might say that this is not a big deal; everybody who holds a Student Visa has to do this and you are not exceptional. You just have enjoyed the Skilled Worker Visa too much and now you can't bear the minimal requirement from the Home Office and border control. Yes, it is probably true. I didn't experience what an *ordinary* international student would have to go through (regular checks, housing discrimination, etc.). I enjoyed the privilege of holding another type of visa. But the policy/warning of monthly checking forces me to come to the realization that—at age thirty-four, with ten years of research experience, in the third year of my PhD and having lived in Europe for five years and in the UK for three—I am still just a migrant student who has to be under surveillance in this border regime. In the end, from China to the UK, I just moved from one type of surveillance to another; better yet, it is one type of surveillance *added* to another. The brutality lies in that it reminds me every single month, if not day, that I am not an ordinary person here in this country:

My life has to be monitored.

My life has to be oriented around the monthly visa check.

My life is only possible when my presence is visible to particular people and institutions, and this juxtaposes with my invisibility as a queer migrant of colour in the society. How hilarious!

Spring

Over the past years, I developed a habit of writing down the fragments of thoughts that linger in my head, to settle them materially, putting them aside in order not to be occupied by them. These notes are also for my PhD work, which involves autoethnographic writing to document my own trajectory of navigating as a queer migrant of colour. Reading through, some of the fragments are the thoughts of me trying to find a way to understand the happenings and the environment, the possible way that could facilitate dissolving the tension in my body, to keep life going. These notes have depicted the shape of my everyday life. When trying to find a story to anchor this narrative writing, I opened the Notes on my computer, and it was triggering:

I saw my past self murmuring, struggling to articulate how the life was like, how it made me cry or even worse, not being able to cry, and how things weren't making sense but few people really cared when I mobilized all the energy to voice them.

I saw myself striving to (not) squeeze into the space that indicates the role that I was expected to play in a particular way, painfully.

I saw myself reassuring myself, battling against the emerging cynicism towards academia, because cynicism would not motivate me to do the work that I still find important. I tried hard to distinguish the system and the work.

I saw a queer migrant of colour bumping into walls wherever she walks towards, stepping back, adjusting the angle, walking again. What awaits there, was another wall, sometimes higher, sometimes lower. The lower one raised some hope, to see things further, to see the future ahead. She then walked further again, but, 'bump'!

I saw this person starting not seeing walls as solid and concrete but porous; transforming herself into tiny fragments in order to percolate through. It is not what lies behind the wall that is her desire, nor to leave other bodies in front of the wall and only get through on her own. It is the endeavour of pushing down the wall itself because when we reside in the middle of the wall as fragments, we could decompose it, like what fungi do to seemingly hard rocks.

Therefore, to this day, I am still in academia, bumping into walls, my head broken and bleeding (头破血流 *tóupòxiěliú*), but still claiming my existence. And the very existence itself *is* resistance.

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II. Nami ni noru 波に乗る (Riding the Waves): My Journey as a Migrant Academic

Nur Daut

As I am writing this essay, a massive earthquake had just hit Ishikawa Prefecture in Japan, which can be felt from where I live in Osaka. My bed shifted from one side of the wall to the other, as my apartment building uncontrollably moved from side to side. This is not that bad, I thought to myself. The earthquake in 2018 was a lot worse. Natural disasters are nothing new to Japan, and I have experienced quite a few since I started my academic career here in 2017. Typhoons, earthquakes, tsunamis, you name it, have become part of my academic journey here in Japan. In fact, these unpredictable natural disasters could very well describe my life as a migrant academic, in Japan and elsewhere before that, sending shock waves to my system which at times have shattered my spirit. However, just like any natural disaster, these life challenges eventually subside, bringing in new hopes and new beginnings.

My essay is a personal reflection of my academic journey, the trials and tribulations as well as the joy, passion, and excitement as I navigate through academia trying to find 'home' in the different environments. My narrative centres on the issue of well-being, which to me includes physical security, career development, and a sense of belonging in all the foreign countries that I have resided in. As if being a foreign academic is not tough enough, my experiences have shown that being a foreign female academic just adds up to the challenges. This essay will focus on my short but profound academic experiences in my home country of Malaysia and then as a foreigner in Türkiye and Japan, where I reside at the time of writing.

Malaysia: Home but Not Home

I have always been somewhat of a nomad. I left home at the age of nineteen to pursue my Bachelor's degree in the United States, and I have never stopped travelling since. I do occasionally wonder how much longer I should continue moving and travelling from one country to another. I find myself 'in between', always starting over, each time with new places and new people. I longed for stability, consistency and, most of all, security. I thought I had it all mapped out when I was pursuing my PhD at a UK university with a branch campus in Belgium. 'This would be the last time', I told myself, and the plan was to settle back in my home country of Malaysia once the PhD was completed.

But destiny works in mysterious ways. After the PhD, I was excited at the prospect of working in Malaysia and finally being able to put down some roots and be closer to my family. As I had received a partial scholarship from one of Malaysia's local universities for my PhD, I was obligated to serve the university upon completion of the PhD degree. But having lived in the United States for four years and then in different parts of Europe for six years, for postgraduate degrees, I struggled to fit into the local setting. My outlook on Malaysian politics, culture, religion, and just life in general made it difficult to connect to my Malaysian colleagues.

To the ethnic Chinese and Indian colleagues in the department, I was just a privileged ethnic Malay from a Malay aristocratic family who did not understand the struggle of other ethnic groups in the country. I was told by a trusted colleague that the gossip in the faculty was that I had been awarded the PhD scholarship solely due to my ethnicity and my family's social status rather than my outstanding academic achievements. My heart sank upon hearing that. I would not have gotten the scholarship had I not made the grades. For my Malay colleagues, I felt that I was just not 'Malay enough' for them. I found their ideas on ethnicity and religion, particularly on Islam, restrictive and superficial. 'She is too Westernized, and can she actually teach in the Malay language?', remarked one senior professor to my Head of Department. 'She doesn't even wear the headscarf!', remarked another. While Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society, the 'hijab culture' was widespread

due to the influence of the Iranian Revolution in 1979. As years went by, competition among different Malay political factions had become about which brand of Islam was the 'right one'. Unfortunately, the 'hijab culture' had been widely accepted as 'the' version and therefore had become part of the 'legitimate' brand of Islam in Malaysia. Certain expectations for a Malay Muslim woman like me exist, such as wearing the headscarf or at the very least be dressed in traditional Malay attire while on the university grounds. How sad, I thought, to finally be back home but not feel 'at home' at all. In hindsight, perhaps my expectations of 'home' or 'belonging' had been based on my privileged and sheltered upbringing, which did not necessarily match the reality. 'Home', I felt, should make me feel safe, at ease and happy. I felt none of those at the time. Instead I felt like I had to constantly prove myself: that I was Malay enough, hardworking enough, and, most of all, good enough!

I was given a full-time lecturer's post with a yearly contract that would be replaced by a permanent post after some years of employment. Being a temporary lecturer and new to the department, I did not have access to research funding and the facilities given to permanent lecturers. I also did not have the opportunity to propose new courses and was only allowed to teach courses presented to me by the department. After a year, I felt so discouraged that I was ready to pack my bags and leave.

I decided to apply for academic positions abroad. In my depth of desperation, I was willing to go anywhere, and so I applied to every available international academic position that was advertised.

I soon received an email for a Skype job interview for an assistant professor position at a university in Türkiye. I was interviewed by the Head of Department and two other senior professors. I learnt from the interview that the university had many international faculty members. I was overjoyed upon hearing this. This was exactly what I was looking for! As it had a huge English language department, there were many Americans and foreign professors on campus. My courses were to be taught in English, and in my soon-to-be department, I had colleagues from Greece, Türkiye, South Africa, and India. I had never been to Türkiye and I was ecstatic! It was one of the best job interviews I ever had and, of course, I got the job! This will be a new adventure, I thought. And a new adventure it truly was.

Türkiye: Oh, What an Adventure!

It was a time of major political crisis in Türkiye between President Erdogan's AKP Party and the Gülen Movement. This was also a time when Türkiye was facing serious threats from terrorist groups like ISIS. I remember coming home from work one evening, only to find that my apartment building had been raided by the commando squad (better known as the special police force) and they had found and detained some ISIS terrorists hiding with a Turkish family in the building. I hardly slept that night. I was advised by other foreign colleagues to pack a small emergency suitcase with only necessary items, in case the situation got worse and I had to flee the country immediately. From that night on, I kept my passport with me at all times with some US dollars in hand, too. If a political coup happened, the Turkish lira would not be worth much.

The university that I worked for was famously known as the Paris of Türkiye. To me, it resembled nothing like Paris. Located in south-central Türkiye, it bordered Syria and was culturally considered more conservative compared to other parts of Türkiye. On my first day of work, the Dean of the Faculty had told me that this was a hard place for a foreign single woman like me. He advised me not to have any male friends over to my apartment as this would make my neighbours uncomfortable. 'We live in a conservative community, and you do not want neighbours to gossip', he said. I was also advised not to be seen drinking alcohol in public. I wished all of this had been conveyed to me during the interview or before I accepted the job offer.

Other than that rather awkward first day introduction by the Dean, Türkiye as a country fascinated me. It had beautiful heritage, food, and culture. So many historical sites to visit, so much to learn and see. I was blessed to have met kind and helpful colleagues, who I still remain in touch with to this day. Teaching was challenging at the beginning for me. Majority of the Turkish students that I taught did not have the university level of English proficiency that would enable them to excel. Courses taught in English were few but seemed to be the new 'trend' as a display of internationalization. Cases of cheating and copying were all too common. Colleagues taught me how to structure exam questions to minimize cheating during examinations. There were exceptional students of course, those that were willing to go the extra mile no matter

how hard the journey. I realised that teaching gave me great joy; but my stint in Türkiye was soon short-lived.

After less than a year, I left Türkiye in June 2016. The political situation got worse. My university was targeted by the government as being pro-Gülen, and so had to be closed. The shutting down of the university had happened rather abruptly, which left me, and other colleagues, shocked and unprepared. We were given about a month's notice to vacate the premises and so there was no time to apply for a new job. I was left with no other options but to return to Malaysia. I learnt later, as I arrived at Kuala Lumpur's airport, that Atatürk Airport in Istanbul had been bombed by ISIS and I had missed the bombing by thirty minutes, as my flight had departed. Forty-five people were killed with more than 230 people injured.

As I watched the CCTV footage of the bombing on CNN, I started questioning whether the PhD was all worth it. I struggled to complete it only to find myself jobless, homeless, penniless, and somewhat traumatized. Was I on the wrong path? Or perhaps it was just a matter of choosing a better place to live and work. I was not going to give up! I stayed with my parents for about half a year and during that time, applying for non-local academic positions became my new passion and my full-time job. In the meantime, as side income, I wrote food and restaurant reviews for a new local travel magazine. I became quite the expert on the best cafes and restaurants in Malaysia.

Lo and behold! Sometime in November 2016, my prayer for a new job in a safe country had been answered. A job offer came in from Japan! I first had an online interview with the Head of Department and was soon informed that I had made it to the second interview with the Vice Chancellor and the Dean of the Faculty. I was overjoyed and grateful that the university was willing to fly me to Japan for the second interview. The idea of travelling to Japan even for a day got me so excited that I couldn't care less about getting the job. But I did get the job! Apart from my academic qualifications, the panel of interviewers had been impressed that I had lived in multiple countries and saw this as an advantage to the university and the students. By this time, my parents had accepted the fact that I would always be working abroad. I convinced them that I was not going to be learning anything new had I stayed home. The land of the rising sun was waiting for me!

Japan: New Beginning and Spreading Roots

My first impression of Japan was how spotlessly clean the country was. One was unlikely to see weeds on the ground, let alone trash. Such a stark difference from the chaos and the hustle-bustle of Türkiye. Türkiye was colourful, exciting, and full of surprises, but Japan was simply beautiful, safe, calm with a touch of mystery that cannot be easily demystified by a stranger's eyes. As a foreigner and a newcomer I appreciated the order and structure. I did not have to worry about trains not arriving on time, for example: everything and everyone was on time. It was almost like everything and everyone in the society had been neatly put together. I was optimistic and eager to start my new life in Japan. This could potentially be my permanent home, I thought to myself.

Perhaps, I might have been a little too optimistic. I left Türkiye for Japan in search of a country that could provide me with a sense of security, only to realize that I was up for a different kind of precarity and instability.

Having lived abroad for so many years, I expected the usual language and cultural challenges as I navigated my journey in this new country. Many of my friends thought I was brave to accept the job offer and possibly insane to move to Japan without having a single Japanese word in my vocabulary. 'I escaped death in Türkiye!', I told them. I must have nine lives like a cat. I might as well make them all worthwhile. I took up Japanese classes over the years, so it eventually turned out alright.

When I first started the job in Japan, I did not have much published work to show. My short and turbulent days in Malaysia and Türkiye allowed me little opportunity to progress in terms of research and writing. This had proved to be a clear disadvantage on my part for securing a permanent position or a *sen'nin*, which is what a tenured academic staff is referred to as in Japan. At least that was what I thought was lacking in my CV in order to be granted a *sen'nin* position. My years in Japan have revealed otherwise.

According to Chen (2023), Japanese universities had gone through a series of internationalization processes since the 1980s. The government of Japan established new policies to actively encourage international academics to come work at Japanese universities. Having foreign academics has improved Japanese universities' global ranking as it gives

the impression that Japanese universities are 'international'. The reality though seems to be somewhat the opposite. There seems to be a 'tug of war' where Japanese universities struggle to accept the inevitable changes brought about by waves of globalization, while at the same time try to maintain their 'Japaneseness' and unique identity. 'It is the foreigners that must adapt', say many of my Japanese colleagues.

Many international academics, especially those with noticeable foreign characteristics, such as white academics (whiteness is often associated with internationalization), have been recruited to visibly represent the internationalization efforts of Japanese universities. Their presence is seen as a means to enhance perceptions of diversity within Japanese higher education. The university brochures, handbooks, billboards, and all other forms of advertisements, all have photos of foreign academics on them, specifically white Western academics. It took me a while to realize that this was also perhaps one of the criteria used for promotion and tenured positions. While it is most definitely not the main or top criterion, it is most likely a preferred one because, again, it gives the impression of internationalization. My academic qualifications from the United States and the United Kingdom have of course added value to this internationalization policy; but because my country of origin is Malaysia, which was an occupied Japanese territory during WWII, I could not stop myself from feeling that my value as an academic was considered less in comparison to my other (white) western colleagues.

I was given a full-time position as an assistant professor and the title *tokunin*, which meant that my contract would be renewed yearly unlike with a *sen'nin*. *Tokunins* are not required to do much administrative duties; however, I was requested to teach five courses each semester without retirement benefits. As part of the internationalization policy, most courses including mine were taught in English. After my rather exhausting and traumatic experiences in Malaysia and Türkiye, I was grateful to finally have a base where I could put down roots and make progress in terms of research and publications. I was determined to work hard so that I could eventually be made a *sen'nin*.

Easier said than done. With five courses to teach, I found myself having very little time to work on my research. As I was required to teach two different programs with different academic calendars, my

summer break only begins in August and only for a month, which again, gives very little time to write and publish.

The other problem was that there were no available guidelines or a handbook that I could refer to, in order to be made a *sen'nin*. I once asked senior colleagues and their replies were simply, 'It is up to the upper management of the university, no one really knows!' Quite recently, a foreign colleague informed me that 'Japaneseness' matters for one to be made a *sen'nin*. It is not enough to speak Japanese but the institution would also consider how long a foreigner like me would remain in Japan. Unless, of course, I was married to a Japanese citizen, then that would automatically increase my chances of being made a *sen'nin*. I thought about it for a moment, and perhaps that was true. It is the unspoken and the unwritten rule. Most of my other foreign colleagues that have been made *sen'nin* are all married to Japanese spouses. Never in my life would I have thought that marrying a local would have a bearing on my promotion or career development. Spreading roots proved to be more difficult than I thought.

On the topic of marriage, some of my female Korean colleagues had one day suggested that I consider plastic surgery and Botox to increase my chances of finding a suitable partner. Plastic surgery is the norm for many South Koreans and Japanese but I found that suggestion to be offensive. I was also told that I should perhaps smile more, particularly when meeting male colleagues that were single. Relationships are private matters, and I had never felt more insulted and humiliated than by those remarks and suggestions.

Precarity, Lifestyle, and Well-being

As a *tokunin*, the yearly contract renewal posed some basic challenges for me. The renewal of my residence permit is dependent upon the renewal of my job contract. This means that my residence permit has to be renewed every year unlike a tenured professor where the residence permit renewal only happens every ten years or so. Much to my disappointment, almost everything here, from securing a housing contract, applying for a credit card, and even getting a local Japanese phone number or SIM card would require at least a three-year valid residence permit.

Decent-sized apartments in Japan are costly. In Japan, there is a custom of 'key money' which is paid to the landlord as a form of 'thank you' when concluding a contract and is not returned. The amount of key money is typically between 50%-100% of the entire rent. One also needs to pay a three-month security deposit where a guarantor is required. The guarantor must be a Japanese citizen or a permanent resident. As a *tokunin*, having a yearly renewed job contract pushes away the possibility of ever finding a guarantor. The ideology of *nihonjinron*, which emphasizes Japanese exclusionism, often creates mistrust and suspicion towards non-Japanese individuals. Having a yearly renewed job contract enhances this suspicion that I might just pack my bags one day and leave the country without notice and the burden of the rent would fall on the guarantor. The only available option for me was to rent a studio apartment which did not require a guarantor. I did not mind it when I first arrived in Japan, but after seven years, I have accumulated more books than ever and so there is an urgent need to move to a bigger living space.

I am not kidding when I say that Japanese apartments are miniature in size! My studio apartment is only twenty square metres. Considering that the space is so small, studio apartments are surprisingly expensive, about 60,000 Japanese yen per month (400 USD). It is obvious to me that these studio apartments were built for single men and women who do not spend much time at home and simply needed a bed to sleep in at the end of the day. The tiny kitchen in my apartment completely ruined my love and joy for cooking. I usually order in or eat out on most days. I have seen my other colleagues doing the same.

Recently, I came across an article on precarity which resonated with me. The author, Shahid (2023), mentioned how instability in academia impairs one's ability to express disagreements in the institutional context. Japan is a clear case in point, mainly due to its hierarchical and collective identity. Age and rank determine how one speaks to another, even among colleagues. One must always know his or her place and if you are a female, foreign *tokunin* like me, you rank at the bottom of the ladder. No questions should be asked. Only accept what you have been tasked. One must always use the right tone of voice, the right choice of words to express disagreements or dislike. I observed and learned this rather quickly during my first year in Japan and made a conscious effort

to follow these rules for the sake of my survival. But these rules were such opposites of my academic training, my core beliefs and values. Deep down, I felt oppressed, suffocated, and unappreciated.

After two years on the job, I became physically and mentally exhausted and was nearly burnt out. I was aware of the *karoshi* culture which literally means death by overwork here in Japan. While the Covid-19 pandemic was a great test to most people, academics included, it actually saved my life and well-being. Classes went online overnight, and Japan closed its borders for almost three years. I made full use of the time to recover from physical and mental exhaustion. Confined to my studio apartment, I finally made progress on my academic writings. The travel bans also meant that I was unable to travel anywhere outside Japan without risking 'no entry' at the airport when returning to Japan. Many colleagues were stranded abroad and with my *tokunin* status, the risk was just too high. I was, after all, dispensable at any time, particularly during a crisis like the pandemic.

The Quest for a Research Grant or *kakenhi* in Japan

In the 1990s, the Japanese government introduced privatization and marketization policies which saw the rise of neoliberal universities in Japan. This had led to the Japanese government reduction of financial support for local universities. As a result, academics in Japanese universities faced difficulties looking for sponsorships or grants to do research.

To obtain additional funding for research, academics in Japan are required to apply for the highly competitive research grant from the government also known as the *kakenhi*. The application is available every year, and I have attempted three times. After failing the second time, I approached a senior professor to read my research proposal to provide me with some feedback. The reply was disheartening. It was my research topic that seemed to be the problem. I wanted to conduct research on Islamic movements and extremism in Malaysia. 'It is too controversial! Why would the Japanese government want to fund this research?' I argued that extremist groups and issues of nationalism are very much the current topic. 'Japanese people prefer topics that are not contentious like tourism, for example, and topics that are connected

to Japan and that can be seen as beneficial to Japan', the professor added. So, for my third attempt, I decided to look at nationalism among Japanese youths, something that I thought could benefit Japan. I did not get the *kakenhi* for that research proposal either and was not given any feedback on why that research proposal was rejected. A thought came through my mind, 'Could this be a form of "control" by the government on what academics could or should research at Japanese universities?'. I suppose I was naive to think that academic freedom is universal and that all universities would be open to any research, even if controversial.

Japan at Its Best

In spite of all the challenges at work, I have grown to love Japan. It is an exceptionally stunning country and I find pleasure in visiting the temples and Zen gardens while enjoying the delightful Japanese delicacies which change according to seasonal ingredients. A country with one of the lowest crime rates in the world certainly proves beneficial for a single woman like me. On occasions where I worked late at the university, I never had to worry about walking home alone. These are the things that actually matter in the end.

Teaching brings me great joy, and I adore my Japanese students. They are hard workers, eager to learn, courteous, and such a delight to teach. I had to make several modifications to my teaching methods at the beginning. Most Japanese students are shy and found class discussions and the readings I assigned rather intimidating. I found myself having to be creative in finding new ways to encourage and motivate students.

Perhaps, I was never meant to fit in and maybe I never needed to. I now fully embrace myself. I am adaptable, open to diversity while still maintaining my core beliefs and values. As I conclude this essay, I think it is time for a new adventure in a different country. After seven years of living in Japan, I have perfected my teaching skills, and my courses usually rank high in students' evaluation.

This does not mean that I have not had my share of challenging students, but they are rare. In one of my courses, I covered issues of Japanese occupation in parts of East Asia during WWII, which angered a few Japanese male students. One of the issues that I covered was 'comfort women' or women that were forcibly taken as sexual slaves by

the Japanese army during WWII. It was then that I realized that these topics were not taught to Japanese students in schools. While they may have heard terms like 'comfort women' and 'Nanjing Massacre', they usually do not have full knowledge of these events. Students told me that in schools, they were required to memorize dates and historical events for exam purposes but were not taught to analyze them. Asking questions was discouraged as this can be seen as questioning the knowledge and ability of the teacher.

While most students were horrified to learn about the 'comfort women' in WWII, one particular male student had accused me of teaching topics of an 'anti-Japan' nature to the class. I clarified that issues discussed were historical facts, not intended to incite hatred or turn Japanese students against their government. I provided examples of students from other countries learning about their own governments' atrocities. One student criticized Japan's apology to South Korea over the 'comfort women' issue, claiming it made Japan seem inferior. Despite finding his reaction shocking, I consider this topic a success, as many students, especially women, later thanked me for broadening their understanding of WWII.

I also find comfort in other migrant academics. They serve as a reminder that there are others just like me, trying to fit in and working hard to thrive in a foreign country. I get along extremely well with American colleagues at the university. For some of these American male colleagues, I have developed deep friendships with their Japanese wives. At the university, I have also formed a deep bond with a group of female Japanese academics that were either trained in the United States or had spent some time teaching in Europe. We share a common connection of being Asian with a Western educational background. They have become my support system and we meet regularly for afternoon teas, each time at a different Japanese tea house. With the rest of the colleagues at work, my relationship remained cordial. Work is a big part of the culture in Japan. It is a sign of loyalty to the organization. It is not the custom to take a vacation. The concept of vacation simply does not exist, as one is expected to work until retirement. A weekend off is what the Japanese consider a vacation. With that, not much can be said about my social life other than my occasional get together with the colleagues that I get along with. During the semester, everyone is extremely busy.

In 2022, after five years of *nami ni noru* 波に乗る (riding the waves), as the Japanese saying goes, I was promoted to associate professor. I was overjoyed and most of all grateful. However, the *tokunin* status remained unchanged. That was two years ago and I have grown as a scholar and as a person. Even though at times I have struggled to fit in and suffered *derukuihautareru* 出る釘は打たれる (the nail that sticks out gets hammered down), my journey has made me richer in terms of experiences. Perhaps, I was never meant for a new adventure in a different country.

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12. Lost and Found: On Being an Average Immigrant Academic

Ila Nagar

The views I express in this essay are based on my personal experiences. The implications that can be drawn are relevant for me and may not be relevant or applicable for anyone who does not share my life experiences. There is a possibility of a generational read here, too. South Asian women who are ten or more years younger than me might find some of the ideas I express somewhat foreign. Social class is also present in this essay, and that might bring up themes that might be alien. I work with three ideas in this essay—being average, being an academic, and being an immigrant. These three ideas and realities conflate for me but are at the same time, in some ways, mutually exclusive.

About five years ago I started exploring the idea that being average while feeling happy is becoming harder to achieve. It is probable that being average is harder in certain socio-economic groups who thrive on ideas like wealth accumulation and status and have no social safety nets. The United States likes words like meritocracy and excellence. People are supposed to be *really good* at what they do. The catch is, being good at some things is more lucrative than being good at other things. Excellent musicians make far less money than excellent bankers. However, excellent is not what I explore. Where do average musicians and average bankers find a place to be? And beyond a place to be, where do they find a place to be happily average? Here is where I turn to me. I am not a musician or a banker, but I am average. My experience and voice in the United States has allowed me to be happily average. Let me explain.

My father always wanted me to live in the West, primarily the United States. Outside the general coolness associated with living in the West in middle- and upper middle-class India at the time I was growing up, I did not understand why that was till much later. I believe he did not want a future for me where marriage to someone of equal or slightly higher status was inevitable. He envisioned a life for me which was lived beyond arranged marriage. Such arranged marriages work, quite well in most instances, and women live fulfilling and happy lives in wealthy homes. I just was not a woman who would enjoy that, and my father must have known. The easiest path for Indians like me to settle in the West is education. My attempts at studying medicine, pathetic as they were, failed. But after attending two universities in India, I was good enough at other things and landed an invitation to join a PhD program in a city whose name I had never heard before. Columbus, Ohio, in the United States of America became my home for graduate school and has remained so for nearly two and a half decades.

A Little History

I went to the best high school in my hometown of Aligarh. This Catholic school—and my father—taught me to speak English. The school gave me an education in ways that did not get the best out of me, however. This school and these kinds of schools worked best for students who are aware of their paths and have the work ethic or the desire and discipline to follow their paths. I was not such a student, and I did not fit into the system these types of schools propagate—if a student is good at science or math, they are encouraged, helped, and supported. They usually landed in the best medicine or engineering schools in India, which in turn landed them pathways to financial and other types of success in India or the West. I was an extrovert and was into dancing in school. I did not fall between the cracks, but I was not visible in merit-based ways. I was visible because I wanted to be. I was excelling at visibility and not excelling at school in general. If a student is average, they can fall between the cracks and can be labelled as not meant for the supposedly best paths—medicine or engineering. For women, another one of ‘the best’ paths was usually marriage. For men, it was a family business of some sort. Encouraging people to be who they need to be was not the

strength of such schools. I was not excelling in high school, and my choices for what to study in college were humanities. I got into studying linguistics, not particularly because I loved the subject, but because that is where my grades landed me.

Studying linguistics at the two universities I went to in India was a different experience than high school. I thrived at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) because I found a space where I was finally interested in learning what I was being taught. I was also one of the few students who was actually paying attention in a humanities class. In the Girl's College at AMU, most women were within a year or two of getting married and were thinking different thoughts than I was. I topped my class because I was finally having some fun with things I was learning. My grades landed me a spot at the top liberal arts institution in New Delhi: Jawahar Lal University. I did not make any waves there and was average again; but letters from professors there landed me a spot in the Department of Linguistics at the Ohio State University (OSU). The institution that I studied at before coming to OSU did not prepare me for what I was about to get into.

Getting Lost

After getting accepted into a PhD program and arriving in the United States, the first class I remember taking at OSU was a graduate level phonetics class. This was after I had obtained a Bachelor's degree with a focus on linguistics and a Master's degree with a focus on linguistics. I do not recall the exact contents of this class, but I recall understanding nothing. From the wall that I was hitting, Keith Johnson, the professor teaching this class, dragged me out. I was in awe of the lack of hierarchy between professors and students compared to universities I attended in India. I was in awe of everything available to me—a library like I had never experienced before, professors who didn't pretend to be gods, classmates who were not trying to get married, and a small but sufficient pay check as a fully funded graduate student. It is not the case that every professor was like Keith Johnson. Plenty of my fellow PhD students did not have advisors as supportive as my advisor, Don Winford. There were many interesting characters but the core difference that hit me was how I was allowed to fail without being belittled. I was allowed to sit in

a professor's office and say that what they were saying was not making sense to me. I did not feel these freedoms when I was in India. They might have been there, but I did not see them.

I have worked for my entire career at one higher education institute. This is by accident and a little bit by design because for the first decade of our relationship, my spouse was tied to the city where OSU is situated. I started at this institution as a graduate student, became a lecturer, progressed to a tenure-track appointment, and eventually a tenured faculty member. Being a PhD student was hard for me in ways it is hard for everyone. It was a bit harder because it was demanding in ways I was not used to. Even though I had a Master's degree from JNU, I had never written a serious academic paper before coming to OSU. Writing one was a steep learning curve. In the early years, writing anything required a lot of editing from my advisor and any professor whose class I was taking. That did not feel easy. Most classes felt hard, and the schedule felt exhausting. It got easier with time and practice and small acts of courage that I demanded of myself.

One of the things that was sustaining me during those years was a sense of absolute independence I felt in the US. I could see my life in India from a distance, and I liked my life in the US better. I liked that I made enough money to completely support myself, I liked that everyone around me expected more than marriage from me, I liked that how I looked had absolutely no value in graduate school. All of these were not true for me in India. If I were in India, I could make very little money with the skills I had. And everyone, except my parents, would expect me to get married. How I looked would have also had far more value than it has in the US. Being independent in India would be possible for me but the hurdles I would have had to cross are not crossable for average people, like me. I would need extraordinary courage to live and be myself. The US allowed me to be me very easily. I loved it then, and I love it now. I also felt physically safe in the US. I did not worry about what time of day or night I was leaving my home to go to school or if anyone would grope me in public transportation or would make weird gestures at me. All of this was new and exciting and, in some ways, still presents as such.

Getting Found

I am writing this section sitting in a hotel lobby in Manaus, Brazil. Because of the way I look, most everyone I have encountered in Brazil so far assumes I am one of them. This is obviously not true. I knew zero Portuguese words till this morning and now I know only one. An important one—*Obrigado* ('Thank you!'). This is not the first time I have been included in groups and communities I cannot claim. People in Spain assumed I was Spanish, and a party at the Los Angeles airport assumed I was Mexican. I return all these pleasant inclusions with a smile and 'I am Indian' only to receive warm smiles back.

In the United States, I am brown. The weirdness of this category for me is that it does not apply to me like it may to other brown people. I did not grow up in the United States. Racism, like many other things, varies by zip code. South Asian experience in bigger cities and richer zip codes is different from what it is in smaller towns and poorer zip codes. That being said, the casual racism of 'your food smells weird', 'your food choices are odd' and so on is not something that I have experienced. Brownness also assumes a certain lack of privilege which was never true for me. I come from reasonable privilege, and I landed in a large public university in the United States at a time in 2002 in a department that was nothing but supportive. Every graduate student made room for me in warm and loving ways—people took me out grocery shopping, helped with other navigational needs, and just made me comfortable. There was the 'your English is so good' comment every now and then from non-academics but it never registered as aggressive to me.

I do not believe that if I had stayed in India, I would be writing sections of any essays from hotel lobbies in Brazil. I do not believe I would have the voice in choices about my life that I have now. Being at a higher education institution in the US has pressures. Pre-tenure scholars have precarious job situations. I was in this position for four years, and it was hard. Things get easier as tenure-track and tenure become available. Academia in the US expects results and research universities expect publications with journals and presses that are sound in academic fields and are well cited and peer reviewed. There are pressures for teaching and service as well. In instances of publication, any pressures I have felt are because of my own work hours. I do not work as much as other

people do because I try to maintain a healthy work-life balance. The pressure to perform is welcome because I like that something beyond a home life is expected of me. Within the context of the pressure, there is room to be average. I can write two instead of four papers a year and still feel happily average. I can publish a book every five years instead of every two or three and settle into a routine of work, home, and contentment. In terms of teaching and service, the pressures are gender related. Research on US academia has shown that women end up with far more service assignments than men. I do more service and teach more students than others in my unit. I don't believe this is because I am an immigrant academic. It is partly because I like to keep busy with a variety of things and partly because of general gender dynamics. However, I have never felt that I have not chosen the service assignments, or I cannot step back when I need to or want to.

In my day-to-day interactions with institutions, being a woman feels more marked for me than being an immigrant. I am treated in a classic way women are treated, which sometimes translates to being treated exactly like anyone else and sometimes translates as being given more than my fair share of work. I don't feel slighted. However, I am aware and I am okay to leave it at that.

There can be a facelessness about being an immigrant that suits me well. I averagely thrive in my anonymity. I like that I don't have a large family community in the US. I like that people I spend time with are people I choose to spend time with. I like that I have pressure to publish and perform. I like that I have a voice in the classroom and that I can command attention for my thoughts. I like that I can do all this while being an average academic who happens to be an immigrant.

For more on joy in academia, read Amisah and Reda in this volume; and Maryna Shevtsova, 'Eighty Dates around the World: On Gender, Academic Mobility, and Reproductive Pressure', in Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.08>

For more on the North American academic context, read Aida, Aizada, Farinaz, Julio, and Shilpa in this volume.

For more by scholars from India, read Shilpa in this volume; and Sanam Roohi, 'Unbelonging as a Postcolonial Predicament: My Tryst with European Academia', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 9–20, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.02>

13. Resilience in Uncertainties: Embracing and Celebrating Black Joy

Amisah Bakuri

To excel, to possess
A quest, to seek, to address
Challenges that test.

Curious mind,
Insights I find,
Each with its name.

To analyze,
To question, to never assume,
To challenge.

Here too, patience is a virtue to hold dear,
The journey is not for the swift,
It's a marathon, not a sprint, to persevere.

Perseverance, resilience, in ample supply,
Several setbacks, as sure as the dawn,
But I defy, carrying on.

Balance, key for my mind,
Nurture soul, my spirit sustain,
Explore nature and connections find.

Collaborate, connect
New truths I seek,
Of ideas and of dreams.

Dear younger me,

I hope this letter finds you well, despite life's ups and downs. As I sit down to write to you, I am filled with reflections on my life experiences as a Black researcher in my mid-thirties in the Netherlands, having pursued my Research Master's and PhD in the Netherlands, the lessons learned, and the paths yet to be explored. There are so many things I wish I could write to you, so many moments I wish I could hold your hand and walk you through, but perhaps the most important message I have for you is one of resilience and joy. I mean, Black Joy.

Resilience holds profound significance for me. I know it has been questioned several times in academia and beyond. But I must tell you that it serves as an important coping mechanism in the face of the many challenges you will encounter. While acknowledging concerns about reinforcing stereotypes like the 'strong Black woman' trope, resilience remains indispensable, and you will need it.

Your resilience will foster you in accepting to live with some of these challenges or the tenacity to overcome the hurdles and persevere to overcome those many hills and mountains of challenges you will encounter in the journey. These challenges include language barriers, cultural differences, visa issues (residency status) and limited access to resources, just to mention a few. You will need to cultivate a sense of agency and empowerment, and I tell you that resilience will help you in countering those feelings of helplessness and marginalization. It will make you assert your evolving and changing identities, advocate for yourself and others who look like you or face what you will go through, to speak up and keep quiet when necessary.

Your resilience will help you to build a community and support network among people who either look like you or feel marginalized. I mean people who are experiencing similar challenges or obstacles and create a space for mutual solidarity and shared experiences. I reckon that while forming networks with these people from marginalized groups it is equally important to create support networks with people who may not look like you and people who understand you. There is the need for forming or building alliances across racial, cultural, and social lines and acknowledging the complexities of identity and privilege. You have to actively listen and be empathetic, necessitating an understanding of diverse experiences that may not align with your own. Your resilience

will be strengthened through the interactions and experiences of members from diverse groups with diverse perspectives. You will need it for the emotional support, validation, and opportunities that come with collective action.

Being resilient will help preserve and promote your mental health and well-being, buffering against stress, anxiety, and burnout commonly experienced by academics. Resilience also means that you take care of yourself, help others, and seek support when needed. You will read a lot about some of the negatives of resilience, and you will question it, you may wonder why I am using it. If you get a better word or notion to describe what I am sharing with you, use it; but for now, I feel resilience is it.

I know. I went on some detour there but as an academic, you cannot help it with explaining why you use certain words, concepts, and terms. You must be clear about what the term you use means, the context and why. So, my resilient younger self, I want you to know that the road ahead will be very challenging, but you are capable of overcoming any obstacle that comes your way. Remember in some cases, you may never overcome it but there is the need to survive it. As you navigate through life, your pursuit in academia and the job market, do not be discouraged by setbacks or rejections; because many of those will come. I encourage you to use the setbacks as opportunities to learn and grow. It is important to stay focused on your goals, even when the path seems unclear. Trust in your abilities and have faith. Remember that you are capable of achieving your set goals, and that your hard work and perseverance will pay off in the end.

As a research student, I know that there will be moments when you feel overwhelmed, when you question whether you are on the right path. Sometimes, the literature you need to read or are asked to cite can feel alienating when the scholars who dominate the field do not reflect your identity or lived experiences, making you question whether you truly belong in the discipline. Research setbacks, like people questioning your ability to do a certain research mainly based on where you come from, can make you question if it is a subtle racist comment or an objective one, leaving you to wonder if these barriers are greater for you than others. These pressures, on top of everyday academic responsibilities, can make it feel like the system is not built for you, leaving you doubting

your place in academia. During those times, I want you to hold on to your dreams tightly. Remind yourself of why you started this journey in the first place, and let that passion drive you forward.

There will indeed be moments of triumph where your hard work and perseverance will pay off, and you will achieve milestones that you once thought were beyond reach. Such as completing a manuscript for publication or chapter of your thesis, getting a funding grant for a conference, meeting people who will truly mentor you, and a beautiful conference presentation, among others. Cherish these moments, for they are the culmination of your dedication and determination as well as having a great support system. They serve as reminders of your strength and resilience, propelling you forward on your journey toward your academic and professional aspirations. In these moments, take pride in your accomplishments and let them motivate you to reach even greater heights. Also, remember to be grateful for all those supporting you in various ways.

Absolutely, I understand the complexity of the challenges you will face. Among them, one significant hurdle will be battling against stereotypes and preconceived notions about Black people, about migrants, and particularly Black migrant women. Sadly, there will be those who doubt your capabilities based solely on factors such as your background, gender, or race. And when these intersect, as they often will, it can indeed feel like a triple burden to bear.

It is important to recognize that these challenges are not a reflection of your abilities or worth. They are rooted in systemic biases and societal norms that unfairly disadvantage individuals like yourself. But whatever the obstacles, remember that you shall overcome them. In the face of adversity, lean on your resilience and determination. Use these challenges to work on your goals but also sometimes to prove the naysayers wrong and to pave the way for others who may face similar struggles. Your perseverance in the face of adversity will not only propel you towards your goals but also inspire others to defy expectations and break down barriers.

In classrooms, corridors, and meeting rooms, you might find yourself as one of the few faces reflecting diversity. Well, you may want to call it a form of tokenism or superficial diversity that fails to address deeper systemic issues. It is in these moments that imposter syndrome may

rear its head, whispering doubts about whether you truly belong and whether you can contribute meaningfully to debates. Do not let these whispers drown out your voice. Remember, your unique experiences and perspectives are invaluable contributions to various discourses, and you come to the table with your unique experiences and understanding of things.

Networking can also be a hurdle, especially in 'new' environment or country where you may not see many faces that look like you in academia. Building connections might feel like scaling a mountain at times. In conferences, workshops, and events, you may find yourself in the minority or even be the only Black person in the room. It can be daunting, especially when discussions revolve around issues (mostly negative and problematic) affecting your community or people who look like you by 'experts' who do not look like you. To pre-emptively address potential criticisms regarding my observations about experts who do not share my background, it is crucial to clarify that my intention is not to dismiss the valuable insights contributed by all scholars or practitioners outside of my community. Instead, I aim to underscore the significance of context and lived experiences when discussing issues pertinent to particular communities. While diverse perspectives can indeed enrich academic discourse, they must be approached with a sense of humility, respect, and reflections on positionalities.

You may face the challenge of initiating conversations and engaging in conversations that question your presence. But trust me, there are going to be awkward introductions and hesitant handshakes. And let me add that you might be asked questions that leave you wondering where they come from, even from those who are highly educated, well-travelled, or involved in the 'decolonial' work. For instance, you may be asked, 'Why do you focus on race? Isn't it time we move beyond that?' a question that minimizes the ongoing realities of systemic racism. Or someone might inquire, 'How does this topic contribute to theoretical discussions?' implying that your work is niche or less valuable and too practical. You might even hear, 'Are you sure you are not defending your people?' These moments can be disorienting, especially when they come from those who should understand the complexity and nuance of research work.

In these moments, I want you to remember your worth and the

value you bring to the table. That is if you are invited to the table; and if you are not invited, please make your own table if you can with those ready to engage in critical discussion. Despite this, your perspectives, experiences, and contributions are invaluable. Do not be afraid to assert yourself and make your voice heard if you want to. Trust me, sometimes, being silent can be the way to go. Do not be forced to speak. Speak when you want and when you feel like it. You do not have time to use your energy on that. Why? Because why not? Seek out allies who share your values and can support you in navigating these spaces. And there will be amazing allies in the journey, those willing to support you, question nuances as well as learn, unlearn, and relearn with you. Learn from others, and forge meaningful relationships. Remember that real diversity strengthens communities, and your presence and experiences add richness to any conversation or gathering. Stay resilient, my younger self, and trust in your abilities to overcome these hurdles.

Participating in academic conferences is crucial for building your professional network, finding mentors, and sharing your research findings, just to mention a few. However, as a migrant academic, you may encounter additional hurdles, such as travel restrictions or financial constraints. As a non-European or non-Western passport holder, you will find that visa requirements and processes can be complex, bureaucratic, and demanding. The many stringent visa regulations, which may include extensive documentation, proof of financial means, and sometimes even interviews at embassies or consulates. These requirements can be stressful and time-consuming, adding layers of difficulty to your travel plans.

Remember, financial constraints may exacerbate these challenges. Traveling for conferences often entails significant expenses, including visa application fees, travel fares, accommodation costs, and conference registration fees. Pray you get some funding, it is tough. If not, be ready to take up these expenses and strain your personal resources. If after all the process, and money spent, your visa is being refused, you have to be strong. Yes, be resilient.

It is important to recognize that, despite thorough planning and preparation, unforeseen delays in the visa approval process can significantly hinder your ability to attend anticipated academic conferences. For instance, you may discover that the approval date

for your visa falls after the conference has concluded, or you may receive your visa and passport only after the event has taken place. Such scenarios can be incredibly frustrating, especially after investing substantial time and resources into preparing for these conferences. You need to be resilient.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the landscape of academic conferences has undergone a substantial transformation, characterized by online and hybrid formats. While the benefits of face-to-face conference attendance such as engaging in spontaneous conversations, networking directly with peers, and experiencing the energy of live presentations are undeniable, please acknowledge the unique advantages offered by virtual platforms. You may join online and hybrid conferences then.

Regarding your PhD, you will dedicate years of hard work and effort towards writing your doctoral dissertation, but unfortunately, circumstances will arise where your employment contract ends before completing your PhD. This will be so tiring, especially considering the financial stability your employment contract provided.

As you find yourself unemployed after four years, you will face the harsh reality of financial instability. The loss of a steady income stream can lead to stress and uncertainty about your future prospects. Financial constraints may hinder your ability to focus solely on completing your PhD, as you will be forced to juggle job hunting and finishing your thesis. Adding to the complexity of your situation is the issue of renewing your work/stay permit in the Netherlands. Which is as time-consuming and emotionally draining as it may seem impossible or unrealistic. Colleagues and friends will keep asking you when you will be going home. The phrase 'when will you go home?' will be common for you. At times, you will feel caught off-guard, answering awkwardly or defensively in ways you necessarily do not want to, attempting to explain yourself, which can be exhausting.

In other moments, you may resist by responding more assertively, challenging the assumptions behind the question with something like, 'Why should I go home, is there no space for people like me here?' There are other times you may simply say 'I will go home very soon' or 'I will let you know if I will go and when'. Over time, you develop a mental readiness for these questions, always expecting them and preparing to deflect or push back in ways that protect your emotional

energy, knowing that it is tricky to answer it 'diplomatically' as sometimes they are not necessarily asked from a point of curiosity but a point of encouragement. You will be encouraged to go home and things will be better for you there and that is where you will truly feel like you belong.

The financial burdens at this point extend beyond your immediate needs. The cost of living in the Netherlands, coupled with expenses such as rent, utilities as well as 'Black tax' will quickly deplete your savings. Oh, and if you do not know Black tax, it is simply the financial burden on Black people to support extended family and community members. Without a stable source of income, you will find yourself grappling with the harsh reality of financial insecurity, unsure of how to sustain yourself while pursuing your academic goals. Just remind yourself that the journey will not always be smooth, but the strength you will gain from overcoming these challenges will be important to you beyond academia. And the resilience you will gain from accepting the fact that you cannot do it all will guide you.

In moments of darkness, hold on to hope and let joy be your guide. Remember that you have the strength to endure and that your resilience can weather even the darkest of nights. Believe in yourself, and never let anyone dim your light. In all these challenges, Black joy is your friend. Black joy carries immense significance, especially in the face of the challenges you will encounter. Black joy is not just about happiness; it is about resilience, resistance, and reclaiming our humanity in a world that often seeks to deny or ignore it.

Above all, be kind to yourself. Celebrate your successes, no matter how small, and do not be too hard on yourself when things do not go according to your plan. You are human, and it is okay to make mistakes, learn from them. What is crucial is that you keep moving, one step at a time. Remember, progress is not always linear; it can be zig-zag or back and forth. Sometimes, it may feel like you are moving sideways or even backward, but stay focused on your goals. Trust that every step, regardless of its direction, contributes to your growth, your learning and your journey towards success. Stay resilient, stay determined, and keep moving no matter the pace or direction.

Black joy is the celebration of culture, achievements, and your very existence in a society that has historically marginalized and oppressed

Black people. It is the laughter shared with friends and family, the music that moves your soul, the dance that expresses your 'freedom', and the food that nourishes your body and spirit. At many of your parties organized with and by friends or colleagues, there would be moments of 'bring something small'. The table offers an array of dishes from across the world and Africa in particular. The famous Jollof rice, a West African staple with its bold flavours from tomatoes, peppers, and spices and assorted meats, will usually be present. This Jollof rice often sparks playful debates about which country, Ghana, Senegal, Nigeria, or beyond makes the best version. There will also be chapati, a soft, golden-brown flatbread from East Africa, perfect for wrapping around grilled meats or soaking up savoury stews. The spread also includes ugali from Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and sadza from Zimbabwe, both made from maize meal and served as thick, slightly grainy accompaniments to rich stews and sautéed greens. These simple yet deeply satisfying dishes bring a sense of comfort and connections. As friends, colleagues, and family share these meals, the lively atmosphere is enhanced by music, with Afrobeats and Amapiano rhythms moving everyone to dance. You may not be good at dancing, but just moving and making mistakes brings the fun and releases some pressures in you. The energy shared on the dance floor will reinforce bonds between you all and create a safe space to make mistakes without judgment.

Yes, Black joy too has faced criticism from various quarters. Some misunderstand it as frivolity or escapism, dismissing it as irrelevant in the face of systemic racism, injustice or as too neoliberal. Others see expressions of Black joy as a threat to the status quo, challenging narratives of Black suffering and victimhood that serve to justify oppression.

But despite these criticisms, I want you to know why I love Black joy. I love it because to me it is a radical act of resistance. In a world that seeks to deny and ignore our humanity, finding joy in the face of adversity is a powerful form of defiance. It is a refusal to be defined solely by our struggles and a declaration that our lives have value and meaning beyond the oppression we endure.

I love Black joy because it sustains me through the darkest of times. In the midst of hardship and despair, it reminds me of the beauty and resilience of the Black communities. It gives me the strength to keep

‘fighting’ for a better future, knowing that joy is not just a fleeting moment but a source of power and inspiration. Black joy is your friend. It is not a mere distraction from the struggle but an integral part of your resistance. Embrace it, celebrate it, and share it with others.

Embrace your identity proudly, for it is a source of strength, resilience and joy. Your unique perspective is an asset, not a liability. Never forget your roots, for they are the foundation on which you stand. Celebrate your culture and heritage and let them guide you in your journey as a Black woman in academia in the Netherlands. You are extraordinary because of your unique identity, and you should always be proud of it.

As a Christian, I find prayer to be an important companion, a nonchalant way to experience God and communicate my struggles or persecutions with him. The power of prayer is real when you believe in it and commit to it. Your grandmother’s and mother’s prayers whispered in the quiet moments of the day, carrying with them strength and resilience that will sustain you through the toughest of times. When you feel overwhelmed by the challenges ahead, turn to those prayers as a source of comfort and guidance. But remember to say your own prayers, too. As you rely on the prayers of older generations and loved ones, your own prayers are important in the struggle. Keep praying, keep going!

In the hustle and bustle of daily life, it is easy to overlook the quiet strength that prayer can offer. But I urge you to never underestimate its significance. Think back to the whispered prayers uttered in the stillness of the night or in the fleeting moments of solitude throughout the day. Those prayers, woven with love and hope, carry a power beyond measure. It gives you hope. Prayer is not merely a ritual; it is a lifeline, connecting you to something greater than yourself. It is a channel through which you can share your gratitude, express your fears, your hopes, and your deepest desires. And in doing so, you open yourself to receiving the wisdom and guidance that transcend the limitations of earthly understanding. In addition to the solace found in prayer, I want to emphasize the immeasurable value of the support system that surrounds you. Cherish them and enjoy them.

As you navigate the challenges in academia, their presence will serve as a steadfast anchor, grounding you. Surround yourself with people

who uplift and encourage you, those who acknowledge your presence and existence, those who would nurture your being and help you grow. Those who believe in you. Those who will ask you questions out of curiosity and not judgment. Seek out those who can see your worth, advise you, provide constructive feedback, and cheer you on, for they will be your strength when you need it the most. Oh yes, a time will come when you will definitely need them.

It is often portrayed that marriage is an impediment to academic pursuits, it might be for some. Each one and their experiences. More often than not, marriage is seen as coming with a lot of domestic roles, time constraints, and restricted social engagement, influencing academic performance. As I said, this might be someone's experience or even from what others have heard. Notwithstanding, let me assure you that marriage and children are not barriers to your academic success; rather, they will become pillars of support that will anchor you in times of uncertainty and doubt. When you find yourself engulfed in the many troubles of life in academia, facing overwhelming responsibilities and challenges, never underestimate the unwavering love and encouragement of a supportive and understanding husband. Emotional and financial support from your husband, meticulous planning, and the guidance of colleagues and supportive supervisors can help you cope with these challenges.

Your husband will be your partner in every sense of the word. Share your triumphs and struggles, and cherish the moments of joy and laughter you will share together. His presence and his own experiences as a migrant man in academia in the Netherlands will be encouraging, although the double burden of frustration is real. This will serve as a reminder that you are never alone. You will encourage each other and 'go through' the struggle together.

Equally, your children will bring boundless joy and inspiration into your world. Their innocent laughter and unconditional love will uplift your spirit and rejuvenate your soul in the toughest of times. Embrace the beautiful chaos of parenthood, for amidst the chaos lies a profound sense of purpose and fulfilment that will drive you to succeed in your academic endeavours and beyond. That will remind you that there is more to life than academia.

Beyond your immediate family, you will meet diverse individuals who

journey alongside you. Among these individuals, some are supportive supervisors, thoughtful mentors, colleagues, or fellow migrants like you. You will have the privilege of encountering kindred spirits who share not only your academic ambitions but also the profound journey of motherhood and parenthood. These colleagues will offer a sense of solidarity and understanding that can be a source of immense comfort and support during challenging times.

Yet, within such companies, you may encounter various attitudes and perspectives. Some individuals may approach you with a genuine sense of empathy and camaraderie, offering a listening ear and practical advice born from their own experiences or those of others. Others, however well-intentioned, may inadvertently adopt a patronizing tone, perhaps fuelled by societal stereotypes or misconceptions about motherhood in academia or even the number of children you have. If you feel comfortable, gently educate those around you by sharing your experiences to challenge misconceptions about motherhood in academia. Setting clear boundaries is essential; if someone's comments come across as patronizing, assertively communicate that you have your own way of managing things. Remember to know when to walk away from consistently negative interactions to protect your energy and mental health.

You will find a community of sisterhood or brotherhood, with some people, some would share a common heritage and identity with you and others who understand or relate with you as a full human. There will be a unique brand of joy, a celebration of resilience, cultural richness, and collective strength. Through the highs and lows, the shared laughter and shared tears, you forge bonds beyond the boundaries of academia, sisterhood, and friendship. Together, you find strength in your experiences and the enduring spirit of Black joy that lightens your path forward. They will celebrate your victories with you, cry with you, and stand by you in times of need. These moments will infuse your journey with a sense of pride and belonging, reminding you of the diverse experiences and traditions that shape your identity and your pursuits. You will find solace and empowerment, knowing again that you are not alone in your journey and some people truly care.

Believe in yourself, dear younger self, and know that you are capable of achieving great things and not so great things. But you are achieving

and losing, and that is life. Stay focused on your goals, lean on your support network when needed, and never lose sight of the incredible journey you are on.

In the face of precarity and adversity, you will find within yourself a wellspring of resilience, an unwavering determination to persevere, push forward, and carve out your own path in the world of academia and beyond. You will learn to navigate the challenges of academia with grace and tenacity, refusing to be defined by the limitations imposed upon you by others and systems. Take the time to prioritize your physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Make sure you are getting enough rest, eating well, and engaging in physical activities that you enjoy. It can be easy to neglect these things and lock up yourself to apply for a job, a grant or complete a paper or chapter.

Remember to take breaks and give yourself permission to disconnect from work. Engage in activities that bring you joy and help you relax, whether it is reading a book (outside of your academic work), watching a movie, or spending time in nature. These moments of rest and rejuvenation are crucial for preventing burnout, maintaining your passion, and pursuing your academic dreams as well as living life. But also, do not be afraid to seek out support from others. Seek out counselling or therapy if you need it. It is okay to ask for help when you need it.

Above all, practice self-compassion. Be kind and patient with yourself, and do not hold yourself to impossibly high standards. Celebrate your successes, no matter how small they may seem, and do not be too hard on yourself when things do not go as planned or when you face rejections and 'ghosting'. Because you will face many of them. Do not let moments when things do not go as planned define your self-worth; recharge and refocus on new goals.

As you continue on your academic journey, remember that you are more than your work. You are a whole person with needs and desires that go beyond your academic pursuits. Take care of yourself, and know that you are deserving of rest, joy, and fulfilment.

Sincerely,

Your older self

My story unfolds,
A story told.
Gracefully treads,
It spreads.

Navigating my way,
Chasing dreams by day,
In research realms,
Black pearls.

Academia's stark,
Unwavering spark,
Becoming strong,
My song.

The path less trodden,
Challenges not forgotten,
Finding joy in my stride,
My melanin still shines.

With family, some colleagues, and friends by my side,
I confide,
The storm, the struggle, the strife,
I still find joy, the essence of life.

For more on mental health, read Anonyma, Franka, Julio, and Nur in this volume; and Anonymous, 'A Stroll through the Darkness: The Mental Health Struggles of a Migrant Academic', in Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023), pp. 61–8, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.07>; Norah Kiereri, 'Who Do the Dead Belong to? Considering the (In)Visibility of Death as an Outsider in France', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 33–42, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.04>; and Vera Axyonova, 'A Journey to the "Self": From Precarity as Non-Belonging to the Search for Common Ground', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.01>

For more on joy in academia, read Ila and Reda in this volume; and Maryna Shevtsova, 'Eighty Dates around the World: On Gender, Academic Mobility, and Reproductive Pressure', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 71–81, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.08>

For more on (feminist) solidarity in academia, read Farinaz in this volume; and Asli Vatansever, 'Survival in Silence: Of Guilt and Grief at the Intersection of Precarity, Exile, and Womanhood in Neoliberal Academia', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 145–54, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.15>; Emanuela Mangiarotti, 'To

the Center and Back: My Journey through the Odds of a Gendered Precarity in Academia', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 155–62, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.16>; and Ladan Rahbari, "'Who Deserves a Chair?': Performative Kinship and Microaggressions in the European Academy', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 213–24, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.21>

For more on (the role of) religion, read Ahmed, Nadine, Nur, and Reda in this volume; and Kiereri, 'Who Do the Dead Belong to?.'

For essays in letter form, read Julio in this volume; and Atamhi Cawayu, 'A Letter to Future Adoptee Researchers: On Being a Researcher of Color in Belgium', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 191–200, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.19> and Alexander Strelkov, 'Conversation with San Precario', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 137–42, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.14>

For more by African scholars, read Babátundé and Franka in this volume; and Lydia Namatende-Sakwa, 'Wiping the Smudge off the Window: The Darkest Time as a Student in Europe', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 183–90, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.18> and Kiereri, 'Who Do the Dead Belong to?.'

14. A Happy Migrant in Unhappy Times

Reda Mahajar

One's home is not the place of their birth but rather the place where all their attempts to escape come to an end.

—Naguib Mahfouz

I was born in 1981 in Damascus, Syria, to parents who were life-long refugees. My first name is Reda. In Arabic, it translates to 'happy' or 'satisfaction'. My last name, Mahajar, when pronounced in Arabic, means 'migrant'. Thus, when combined, my full name can be playfully translated as 'happy migrant' and trust me, being a 'happy migrant' is no small feat in today's world! You try keeping up a smile while dodging bullets and bureaucratic red tape! My life story is not merely a tale of moving from one geographical point to another; it serves as a testament to the challenges posed by post-colonial boundaries, especially in the Global South. I hope that this narrative, with its nuances, motivates the readers to think about the impact of colonial legacies on academic lives and the difficult processes of finding one's way through complicated histories.

From Lahore to Damascus: My Family's Journey Across Borders

Lahore, a vibrant Pakistani city shaped by empires, is integral to my story. In the early 1960s, my father, driven by spiritual and academic aspirations, dreamt of studying at a renowned Shia religious academy

in Karbala, Iraq. This ambition led my grandfather to relocate the family to Karbala, a city of profound religious significance. Karbala is located southwest of Baghdad and witnessed a key event in Islamic history: the Battle of Karbala (10 October 680), in which Imam Husain, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was killed. The city houses the shrines of Imam Husain and his half-brother Al-Abbas, attracting millions of Shia pilgrims annually. The question remains: if my father moved to Karbala in the early 1960s, why was I born a refugee in Damascus, Syria, in 1981 and not in Karbala, Iraq? The answer lies in the rise of Saddam in Iraq. By the early 1970s, Saddam, who was then the vice president, was getting ready to strengthen his hold on the country. Saddam's rise was not just a political event; it had a big impact on many people's lives, changing them in deep and often painful ways. My father was one of many who were directly affected by Saddam's rule. He, a political dissident opposing Saddam's draconian rule, was imprisoned for three harrowing years.

After this painful experience, my father was deeply scarred by what he went through under Saddam's rule. Iraq, once his home, had become like a huge prison filled with fear and oppression. Knowing the dangers of staying in a country ruled by a dictator who had already imprisoned him once, my father decided that leaving Iraq was the only way to keep himself and his family safe.

After my father made the tough decision to leave, his little family became like many others from the area: they were people in search of a safe place during a chaotic time. They moved across the Middle East, crossing many borders. With each move, they would start to feel hopeful again, but those feelings were often cut short by the harsh realities of the Middle East. Eventually, in the early 1980s, they settled in Syria. Back then, Syria seemed like a stable haven compared to the unrest in neighbouring countries. However, their decision to move there was based on what turned out to be a mistaken belief that Syria was the safest country in the world. Spoiler alert: it was not.

I was born there, in Damascus, in 1981. Born a refugee into a family of refugees. Borders, while designed to mark territories, deeply affect human lives by creating divisions and distinguishing between those who are accepted and those who are seen as outsiders. I often felt out of place in this context of borders. Born in Syria, I experienced the

complexities of the Middle Eastern hierarchy of citizenship firsthand. The region's intricate socio-political dynamics impose a silent hierarchy based on one's country of origin. It soon became painfully clear to me that holding a Pakistani passport placed me at the bottom of this hierarchy. This passport, which should have represented my national identity, instead became a source of numerous challenges. It was like a ball and chain, preventing me from exploring other countries. As a result, my travels in the Middle East were difficult, and I had to stay in Syria for most of my adult life.

Identity is like a complex, multi-sided jewel, shining differently depending on how you look at it, and each side shows another part of who you are. For someone like me, with a rich and varied background that crosses different places, this sense of identity is especially complex. These complexities are not just about history; they show up in everyday details, even in the language we speak.

My family ties to Iraq gave me a distinctive Iraqi accent. This linguistic identity had unexpected consequences in Syria, where there is strong pride in their own Arabic dialect. My Iraqi accent stood out and had various implications in the socio-political landscape of the time, affecting activities such as making friends, shopping, or even taking a taxi. The year 2003 marked a significant turning point for Iraq. The ensuing war caused political upheaval and led to the displacement of many Iraqi citizens. A large number of these displaced people, particularly Shia, sought refuge in neighbouring Syria.

The arrival of Iraqi refugees in Syria uncovered the latent racism in Syrian society. As their numbers increased, so did tensions within the Syrian communities. Initially expressed as quiet concerns, these tensions quickly turned into open racism towards Shia Iraqi men, perceived as aggressive and savages, while Shia Iraqi women became objects of Syrian male sexual fantasies. By late 2003, the once welcoming Syrian community began showing clear signs of racism and xenophobia. The Iraqi refugees soon began to be viewed through lenses tinted with suspicion and fear of the Shia Iraqi Other.

In this context, I often hid my Iraqi Arabic accent by speaking with a Damascene accent instead. However, my name, Reda, which is the name of the 8th Shia Imam, was a giveaway. While some Sunnis, such as in Egypt, might name their children Reda, in many places like Syria, Reda

is distinctly a Shia name.

And being a Shia in Damascus at that time was an illuminating experience. Consider the events of early March 2004, when at least 100 Shia pilgrims were killed in Karbala by nine Sunni suicide bombers. That night, I joined my friends for dinner in the old city of Damascus. My companions, mostly secular Sunni Syrians, included many women in mini-skirts and I had known them for many years by then. Despite their secular outlook and their long friendship with me, this did not prevent them from openly celebrating the success of Sunni terrorists in disrupting the Shia pilgrimage to Karbala—a city profoundly significant to my family and Shia worldwide. Their jubilant reactions to the bloodshed in Karbala felt like a personal violation. Indeed, I was out of place in Syria!

Finding my Educational Path

I have explained my background in detail to help you understand my educational journey. To Syrian society, I was an anomaly: a Shia with an Iraqi accent and a Pakistani passport. My choice of education further set me apart. Seeking higher education as a mature student, I chose to enrol in the University of London International Programmes, a distance learning program. This decision was often met with derision from my Syrian friends, who saw it as lacking value. Ironically, they never noticed the contradiction in dismissing a globally recognized program while praising their Syrian university system, which rarely fosters critical thinking.

The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) led this distance learning program, bringing its rich history and formidable academic reputation to this off-campus arrangement. The program was designed so that its students could earn a degree indistinguishable in weight and merit from one obtained through in-person attendance in London. While many might see this as a mere alternative to traditional education, to me, it felt like finding a lifeboat on the Titanic. It was an open door when many others seemed permanently closed. In a refugee world of slammed doors, this was my golden ticket.

After finishing my undergraduate degree, I had another lucky break. A well-known American academic and mentor, who graduated from

Princeton, once told me, 'Reda, you are a big fish in a small pond', and suggested I think about continuing my studies. He specifically recommended looking into graduate studies in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at Princeton University. Because why not aim high when you're already swimming against the current? Encouraged by his advice and the chance to study at such a prestigious institution, I approached Princeton with my interest in their graduate program, and they were very receptive to my potential application.

To prepare for the next phase of my academic journey and aware of Princeton University's rigorous selection criteria, I decided to take a gap year in the 2010-2011 academic cycle. This choice gave me ample time to prepare for the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), an essential part of the admissions process. I expected that during this period, both Damascus and Syria would remain peaceful, allowing me to focus on my goals without distraction.

But because life loves a plot twist, Syria decided to audition for the role of 'Most Unpredictable Place on Earth'. In March 2011, the Syrian crisis erupted, disrupting countless lives, including my own plans. It is amazing how quickly 'I need to ace the GRE' can turn into 'I need to survive this war'. Yet, hope often shines brightest in adversity. The University of London, where I had earned my undergraduate degree, once again became a beacon in my academic journey. They offered me an opportunity for postgraduate studies, specifically a Master of Research in Educational and Social Research Methods. This program was facilitated through the Institute of Education at the University College London, a renowned academic institution. At least one thing went right in this comedy of errors.

Studying in Damascus during the conflict was extremely difficult. I became very good at using the Blackboard system, an online platform that was an early version of tools like Zoom and Teams that we use today. For many people, these platforms are just a convenient way to communicate, but for me, they were essential for dealing with the challenges of studying in a dangerous and chaotic place.

As classes started and students from different places joined, making sure the audio worked properly became a regular task. But unlike other students who might have been worried about small technical glitches, my situation was a bit more serious. I remember often making a joke to

lighten the mood by saying, 'If you hear the scary sound of an explosion in the background, please stay calm; unfortunately, this has become a normal part of life in this city'.

I faced many challenges at the time. It was not just about securing a stable internet connection or maintaining power for my computer; it was about staying focused and committed despite the violent war surrounding me. Every lecture I attended, every assignment I submitted, and every discussion I participated in was an act of resistance against the chaos that sought to disrupt my studies.

My dedication did not go unnoticed. When it was time to move forward in my academic journey and I needed references, my Master of Research (MRes) supervisor wrote a particularly insightful recommendation letter for me. In it, he highlighted the tough circumstances in which I studied. He wrote: 'It should most certainly be mentioned that for the duration of the MRes course, Reda was working from a very difficult context, firstly from Damascus during the start of the civil war, and latterly as a refugee in Lebanon. His truly excellent work did not suffer in spite of this. I can only imagine what he may be capable of if he were in a more stable context'.

They say 'beggars can't be choosers', and that really resonated with my own story. My dedication to my MRes studies became a stable, guiding light during a time of overwhelming uncertainty. It was the one thing I held onto while navigating the turbulent waves of the Syrian crisis. It was my academic version of a life jacket.

Escalation

By 2013, Syria had become a centre of growing tensions and unrest; there were multiple suicide attacks in my neighbourhood in Damascus and my house was hit with bullets and mortar attacks. The situation was made even more difficult for me due to the travel restrictions of my Pakistani passport. I faced limited movement and dwindling opportunities, leaving me with no clear path forward.

However, a significant geopolitical event soon altered my course. In August 2013, former US President Barack Obama condemned Syria's use of chemical weapons and threatened military action. This threat led to a

crucial development: Lebanon temporarily allowed all foreign nationals in Syria to cross its borders. Seizing this opportunity, I benefited from my Pakistani passport for the first time in my life and, having endured a challenging twelve-hour wait at the Syrian-Lebanese border, finally found refuge in Lebanon.

In the bustling environment of Lebanon, I once again found myself in the difficult position of being a refugee. There were many challenges, including financial difficulties and the constant fear of being sent back to the chaos I had escaped in Syria. Because of my Pakistani passport, renewing my temporary residency permit in Lebanon was a difficult and uncertain process. Sometimes it was renewed for one month, other times for three, or at most six months. With each renewal, there was no guarantee whatsoever that it would be renewed again. It was a constant nightmare; I had nowhere in the world to go back to, literally.

However, it is often said that even in the darkest times, there are glimmers of hope. For me, this hope was found at the American University of Beirut (AUB). With its rich history and dedication to learning, the AUB was my sanctuary amidst all the uncertainty of Lebanon.

The Head of Access Librarian at the AUB's Jafet Library extended a kind generosity that changed my academic journey. She granted me access to the library for most of my five-year stay in Lebanon. I would go to the library in the morning and work frantically until 11:30 p.m., constantly fearing that each week or month might be my last in Lebanon. Her support was crucial for my research and the success of my master's dissertation. It also paved the way for me to write PhD scholarship applications. Right there in the Jafet library, I applied for so many PhD scholarships in the US, Canada, the UK, Ireland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Australia, Hong Kong, and Singapore. I also contacted hundreds of potential PhD supervisors around the world over these years.

In my last one and a half years in Beirut, I needed to be affiliated with a department of the AUB to continue accessing Jafet Library. Typically, affiliations are granted to doctoral or postdoctoral researchers, not to someone like me who was merely applying for PhD scholarships abroad. I approached the Assistant Director at the Centre for Arab

and Middle Eastern Studies, explained my situation, and she was very helpful in granting me the affiliation I needed to access Jafet Library and be nominally associated with the AUB during my last one and a half years in Beirut.

The word 'refugee' carries a heavy burden, filled with many discouraging implications. One of the hardest parts for me has been having my applications for student visas to the United States rejected twice. This was particularly frustrating because I had worked hard to secure two full doctoral scholarships in sociology at the State University of New York at Binghamton for both 2016 and 2017. I remember each time I wrote to Binghamton to inform them of the disappointing outcome of my visa application, I struggled to hold back my tears.

The US embassy in Beirut denied my visas, stating I lacked 'sufficient ties' that would compel me to return to Lebanon or Syria after my six-year PhD program. After some thought, I reluctantly agreed that their assessment had some truth. I had no strong connections to either country. I was born a refugee in Syria and found myself in the same position in Lebanon. The term 'refugee' has defined my life at every stage. It seemed the only 'sufficient tie' I had was to the endless bureaucratic red tape.

In 2017, I had a glimmer of hope when I was offered a PhD scholarship from Brock University in Canada. However, this opportunity was quickly overshadowed by the financial requirements of the Canadian student visa. Despite this, my optimism was renewed when I received an offer from the Brussels School of International Studies, a Belgium campus of the University of Kent in the UK.

To pursue this opportunity, I had to spend \$400, all the money I had, to translate and authenticate essential documents at the Belgian embassy in Beirut. I was very sceptical about getting the visa, but miraculously, it was granted. This marked the beginning of a transformative phase in my life, as I moved from the tumultuous environment of Beirut to Brussels. Goodbye chaos, hello chocolate and waffles!

Over the next five years, Brussels became my home. During this time, I had the chance to travel to six different European countries, a dream I had once thought impossible during my years in Syria and Lebanon. I went from dodging bullets and mortar attacks in Damascus to dodging bicycles in Amsterdam. That is what I call progress.

Gaining 'the Status'

In 2020, following the advice of several academics at my university, I applied for formal refugee recognition in Belgium. Their belief in my cause led them to start a crowdfunding campaign to raise money for an immigration lawyer. By 2021, the Belgian government officially recognized my refugee status. Finally, I had found a place I could truly call home.

In March 2023, I officially became Dr. Reda Mahajar. My PhD research project examined the historical stubbornness of the 'Sunni' and 'Shia' labels as categories of power in the Arab and Muslim worlds as well as in the proverbial 'West'. While in Brussels, I had the unique opportunity to explore a subject that had long fascinated me. Adopting a poststructuralist lens, my research delved into the intricate interplay of gender dynamics, power structures, and spaces and histories of culture constitutive of the 'Sunni' and 'Shia' categories. These themes are deeply controversial to discuss and even more dangerous to research and publish about in the Middle East.

As a newly minted PhD, I walked out of the University of Kent campus in Brussels and took a deep breath. I could not help but reflect on the journey that had brought me here. The struggles and obstacles along the way were immense, but I managed to overcome them all thanks to the support from the academics and professional staff of the distance learning program of the University of London, lead colleges LSE and UCL, the Head of Access Librarian at the American University of Beirut's Jafet Library, the Deputy Director of the Centre for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies at the same university, and the academics at the Brussels School of International Studies. This achievement was not just for me; it was for every single person who helped me overcome and navigate the difficulties of living as a refugee seeking an academic path.

Speaking of refugees, I draw inspiring parallels between my own journey and that of the University of Kent's Emeritus Professor Abdulrazak Gurnah, the Nobel Prize for Literature 2021 recipient.

He was a refugee, as am I.

He earned his first degree from the University of London International Programmes, where I too, received both a BSc and an MRes.

He pursued his PhD studies at the University of Kent, and I have

now officially become Dr. Reda Mahajar at the same institution.

He taught post-colonial studies at the University of Kent, and I, in turn, taught International Migration using a post-colonial studies perspective at the same institution.

My university, Brussels School of International Studies, University of Kent profoundly changed my life. It was with a heavy heart that I received the news of its Brussels campus closing on 30 March 2023. The academics there gave me an opportunity to pursue my dream PhD research project, which completely altered the course of my life. Today, I have a home in Brussels and a PhD in International Relations, all thanks to their support and belief in me. I have now found a new temporary intellectual home at the University of Antwerp, as a temporary, part-time guest lecturer in Sociology, which I hope will one day become a permanent intellectual home for me.

During my time at the Brussels School of International Studies, many peers and professors affectionately called me the 'happy warrior'. It reflects a mix of optimism and resilience in facing challenges. Looking back on my journey, I believe I somehow do embody this title, embracing both the joy and tenacity it represents.

Afterword

Despite having finally found a place to call home and fully embracing my 'warrior' identity, I continue to encounter challenges that are beyond my ability to overcome. One of the major challenges I have faced following the closure of my university has been securing a postdoctoral fellowship. This is particularly complicated due to my refugee status, as most EU-funded postdoctoral fellowships, which constitute the vast majority of postdoc and research funding schemes in social sciences available in Belgium, require a mobility component. Specifically, candidates must have resided abroad for at least 12 of the 36 months preceding the starting date of an EU-funded postdoc or research position, without working or studying in Belgium during this period. However, as a recognized refugee in Belgium, I cannot fulfil this requirement. While Belgium, my newly adopted home, has generously granted me an unlimited work permit with my residency, I am unable to work or study outside Belgium until I obtain Belgian

citizenship. Consequently, I am automatically ineligible for EU-funded postdoctoral or research positions, such as those offered by Marie Curie, Horizon Europe, or similar programs, due to this mobility requirement. It seems that those who wrote this mobility requirement did not consider the situation of refugees/academics like me, for whom the mobility requirement is almost impossible to meet. My sincere hope is that if my account is read by anyone in the EU research funding bodies, they will see the need to revise the mobility requirement for academics with refugee status like me.

It is important to recognize why mobility injustices in EU-funded programs often go unchallenged: many refugee researchers remain silent out of fear. Several colleagues I've spoken to about this issue have shared their reluctance to speak up, worried that publicly revealing their refugee status could put them or their families at risk in their countries of origin.

My situation, however, is quite different. I have no home to return to—Belgium is my home now. And it is this sense of permanence that gives me the freedom to speak out against the institutional injustices in EU-funded research programs that continue to exclude researchers like me.

For more on the significance of (losing and reclaiming) one's name, read Diana, Franka, Nadine, and Xin in this volume; and Ladan Rahbari, "'Who Deserves a Chair?': Performative Kinship and Microaggressions in the European Academy', in Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023), pp. 213–24, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.21> and Olga Burlyuk, 'A Smart Hot Russian Girl from Odessa: When Gender Meets Ethnicity in Academia', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 163–80, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.17>

For more on brutal border and visa regimes, read Anonymous, Babátundé, Franka, Julio, Reda, and Xin in this volume; and Lydia Namatende-Sakwa, 'Wiping the Smudge off the Window: The Darkest Time as a Student in Europe', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 183–90, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.18>; Tara Asgarilaleh, 'On Being a "Migrant Academic," Precarious Passports, and Invisible Struggles', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 95–102, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.10>; Vjosa Musliu, 'Have You Ever Heard of British Hospitality? Neither Have I', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 83–94, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.09>

For more on (the role of) religion, read Ahmed, Amisah, Nadine, and Nur in this volume; and Norah Kiereri, 'Who Do the Dead Belong to? Considering the (In)Visibility of Death as an Outsider in France', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 33–42, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.04>

For more on the limits of meritocracy, read Ahmed, Diana, Farinaz, and Nur in this volume.

For more on being unable to return home, read Anonymous, Fatima, and Farinaz in this volume; and Asli Vatansever, 'Survival in Silence: Of Guilt and Grief at the Intersection of Precarity, Exile, and Womanhood in Neoliberal Academia', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 145–54, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.15>

For more on academic mobility requirement, read Julia, Nur, and Xin in this volume; and Maryna Shevtsova, 'Eighty Dates around the World: On Gender, Academic Mobility, and Reproductive Pressure', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 71–81, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.08> and Olga Burlyuk, 'A Smart Hot Russian Girl from Odessa: When Gender Meets Ethnicity in Academia', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 163–80, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.17>

For more on financial precarity, read Aizada, Amisah, Farinaz, Julio, and Shilpa in this volume.

For more by scholars from the MENA, read Ahmed, Anonymous, Nadine, Farinaz, and Fatima in this volume; and Rahbari, "'Who Deserves a Chair?"; Asgarilaleh, 'On Being a "Migrant Academic"'; and Sama Khosravi Ooryad, 'Inside the Migrant Academic's Body: Strategic Outsider within Toxic Substructures', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 201–12, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.20>

15. In It Differently, Together: Working through Precarity as a Migrant Supervisor and International Doctoral Student

James Burford and Fatima Alhaj Hasan

Jamie

If I'm ever asked to address a gathering of doctoral students, I often introduce myself by talking about my own PhD research. Starting there is a position of common ground, something shared. I commonly tell students that I investigated the felt experience of being a doctoral student for my PhD, a revelation that often prompts a wave of gentle laughter from an audience. What I don't always share is the finer detail: my PhD investigated how the felt experiences of doctoral students are shaped by a host of political transformations that have occurred to higher education institutions over recent decades. We know that the ongoing neoliberal transformation of higher education has had profound impacts on the nature of academic work and the lives of academic workers. My PhD project sought to understand what pressure this places on doctoral students, many of whom also aspire to academic futures. My thesis looked at the cruel optimism of fantasies of the academic good life, anxiety associated with doctoral writing productivity, the competitive and pressurized environment that many doctoral students are now socialized into, as well as the possible pleasures of failing to become an idealized neoliberal doctoral subject. To say it was uneasy researching

the precarious conditions of academic work while seeking to become an academic myself would be an understatement. Taking the precarity of doctoral students as the object of my research made me very self-conscious about my own vulnerability to academic precarity. But more on this in a minute.

Prior to commencing my doctoral studies, I had already had a fairly mobile life. Early in my twenties, I had done what many young queer people do and got as far away from my hometown, and all of its rigid gender conformity and scary homophobia, as possible. In 2007, I moved to Taiwan to work as a teacher and to undertake part-time language study, then moving back to the capital city of Te Whanganui-a-Tara/Wellington in New Zealand in 2008 to undertake a Master's degree. My Master's led to a period of living in Bangkok for five months in 2009 to undertake ethnographic fieldwork with queer NGOs in Thailand. This period of fieldwork was transformative of my outlook and interests as a researcher, and led to enduring relationships with activists and academics in Thailand that I treasure to this day. I was also a very young researcher who found it difficult to negotiate the risky situations I often found myself in. Sexual violence and coercion were present threats, whether while observing public health promotion activity in bathhouses, or extracting myself from contacts who hoped our relationship might develop in a romantic direction. I thus returned to Wellington with renewed interest in queer advocacy and research, but also harmed by some of the dangerous, at times life-threatening, experiences I had as a novice researcher in the field.

In 2010, I moved to the South Island of New Zealand to accompany a former partner who had taken up a doctoral scholarship there. It was in Ōtepoti/Dunedin that I began working as a queer youth worker and queer student support coordinator at a university. In 2011, I also began my own doctoral studies as a distance student at a university in Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland, in the North Island. I almost got through my first year of study before further upheaval. My mother became mysteriously and seriously unwell and I paused my doctoral studies and moved back to my hometown of Ōtautahi/Christchurch to care for her (Burford and Hook, 2019). At that time, Christchurch was recovering from the deadly earthquakes of 22 February 2011, which had turned the city I knew into a place filled with rubble that

I could barely recognise. Nearly every day was punctuated by jolting aftershocks, where we would wonder whether another ‘big one’ was coming. I lived between two homes during this period, part of my time living with my parents caring for my mother and part of my time at the Otautahi Urban Monastery with my then partner and wonderful caring men who nourished my spirit.

Once my mother’s health had stabilized, I resumed my PhD and then eventually accompanied a former partner who had secured academic work in Thailand. I took up a visiting fellowship at a university in Bangkok (2013-2014), and then an academic role on a biannual ‘foreign expert’ contract (2014-2017), all while completing my doctoral studies part-time. While the academic position I secured in Thailand was deeply fulfilling intellectually and professionally, and I was able to teach and research with exceptional colleagues, financially I began to feel like I was getting stuck. While the conditions in my contract had some benefits not accorded to my Thai colleagues (e.g. a housing allowance), it was still below the minimum wage of my home country. It was also difficult for me to see a path forward that would involve career progression in Thailand, or abroad.

Always interested in researching where I am, I had begun a research project investigating the career experiences of *aa-jaan dtàang châat* (อาจารย์ต่างชาติ) or migrant academics in Thailand. Through that project I also learned more about perceptions of stigma that can attach to academics who make so-called ‘unconventional’ or ‘reverse’ career movements from the Global North to the Global South. While I deeply valued what I had learned by working as an academic in Thailand, I learned that others may not value it the way I did. I began to fear I might get ‘locked out’ of other career opportunities, including the possibility to someday be able to return home with any kind of financial security. After I completed my PhD (2016), I spent many months on the academic job market applying, mostly unsuccessfully, for academic positions all over the world. It was as if all the things I had been reading and writing about for my thesis about the precarity of doctoral students were about to play out in my own life. I made tables with traffic light systems to track the many applications I had made. I chose a cut-off date where I would draw a line under applying for any further academic work and transition into something else.

In mid-2017, I was on the move again when I secured an academic role in Naarm/Melbourne in Australia. This position was full-time and 'ongoing', and it allowed me to move closer to home and to family. In many ways this was a dream job, allowing me to continue to teach and research in the area of doctoral education. As I was packing up my apartment for the move, I received a call from my family asking me to take the next flight home as my mother was gravely ill. My boyfriend and I rushed to Suvarnabhumi Airport, painfully aware of the fact he was unable to accompany me on the flight because of visa requirements. Just as I was about to board the long and lonely flight home I learned that my mother had died.

This event, occurring just before I started my first 'permanent' academic role, was inauspicious. Somehow in the wake of my mother's death, Melbourne started to feel somewhat haunted. In the early months, I often found it difficult to remain watertight, let alone create a new life and meet new students and colleagues. But slowly, and bumpily, I worked through my grief and began to find sparks of joy and career satisfaction in Melbourne.

The move did also mean being physically separated from my partner, who had signed on for a doctoral scholarship in Thailand in the months leading up to me getting the job in Australia. We managed to see each other fairly regularly up until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, when Australia's borders were closed to all non-residents in March 2020. I was living in Melbourne, which is sometimes described as having had the 'world's longest lockdown', which stretched beyond 260 days in total. As a result of the pandemic and border closures restricting the mobility of international students, the 'ongoing' academic job I had secured became at risk. Australia's ruling Liberal-National coalition government made Australian public universities ineligible for the JobKeeper income support scheme set up to prevent job losses. As such, Australian universities cut tens of thousands of jobs. The institution I worked for first cut many casual teaching staff, and also negotiated with unions an agreement to cut permanent workers' pay in exchange for a commitment to protect jobs. Once this agreement ended, a series of voluntary and forced redundancies were planned, amounting to up to approximately 15% of all staff at the institution I worked for. This was a scary and unpredictable time, made more complex by the fact that I was

on a visa category which excluded me from certain entitlements others could rely upon.

Amid all of this, I heard a permanent full-time role had come up at an institution in the UK that I had previously come to as a visiting scholar in 2019. The role was a good fit for my experience and interests, and I applied and was shortlisted for it for the first time in mid-2020. But this institution was also concerned about what international student recruitment was going to look like after the pandemic, so the role was paused and reviewed. Eventually, in early 2021 the role was released, and I successfully interviewed for the position. This time I was moving to the UK, a place my (mostly Scottish) ancestors had left many generations ago. I wondered what message they'd have for me as I was set to return to these islands. Learning from my previous difficult experience of migrating to Australia in the wake of bereavement, I tried to be as intentional as possible about my next move. I found some wise words that I would whisper to myself when I needed them: *you are doing a bold and audacious thing*.

I have been living in the UK for over three years now. I work at a prestigious Russell-group institution, where I have been promoted, lead a Master's program, co-founded a research centre, and became the editor of a journal in my field. It might look to an observer that I have 'arrived' and achieved career success. Sometimes it even feels that way to me too. But my training as a queer scholar encourages me to cast a sceptical eye toward norms that adhere to 'success' in academia, and my previous experiment with a 'permanent' academic role has made me wary of the hollowness of this word. In December 2023, my partner, also an academic, finally made it to live with me in the UK, too. After being separated for so many years through the pandemic, we are now in the fortunate position of being not only on the same continent, but actually living in the same house! No more transcontinental romance! He is currently making his way in his career on short contracts, so our shared journey with precarious academic work is for now an ongoing one.

The history I have shared of my academic migration experience tells something of the busy activity of moving. However, the full picture is of course more nuanced and complex. During each of these moves I have often maintained multiple commitments at once: with study, or family,

or a partner being based in one place, while I have been in another, necessitating lots of movement between. I have also been, as many academics are, a mobile scholar. Aside from longer shifts for work, I have also undertaken lots of short-term travel to collect data, attend conferences and meetings, and undertake international fellowships. Travel has, in many ways, been more of a constant for me than staying in place.

While as a line on a CV or a website, academic migrations can appear as if they were tidy movements where a person gets from A-to-B, in my experience they have been uneasy and tangled up in things. Throughout my academic career I have found it easier to throw myself onto a plane and just move somewhere. I have found it much harder to figure out how to land, how to live somewhere new. While at some points I took for granted that I can work in one part of the world and my loved ones can live in another, the Covid-19 pandemic has rattled any such assurance.

Reflecting on my own experience as an academic migrant, I have been contemplating some questions: How does moving places impact on the way I teach, including doctoral supervision? What is it valuable to bring from home, and what should I adapt or leave behind? Which communities do I aim to serve when I move places? How does movement reverberate through the knowledge that I produce, the way I produce it, and who I produce it with? What ethical responsibility do I have to my hosts? And how might my answers to these questions look different depending on where it is that I land? Aside from the professional questions, there are personal wonderings too: what does it mean to not live somewhere long enough to properly unpack and start a life? In my experience, a sense of being 'on the move' can creep into daily decisions: the big bag of flour or the small one? Should I give up buying books? Buy a new bottle of perfume or use up all my old ones? Can I commit to orthodontic treatment? Should I bother finding a regular doctor or hairdresser? And even as I count some of the personal costs of mobility, I know that as a Pākehā (white settler) man with a New Zealand passport, a PhD, and no dependents I am highly privileged when it comes to my academic motility. Because of these factors, and others too, I have been well-cushioned to deal with the turbulence of all of this moving around I've done in pursuit of academic work.

Fatima

My academic career took its first steps on the unstable ground of a full-time temporary teaching contract fresh out of graduation in 2006. This contract at the first Syrian university I worked at, renewable annually, was a fragile promise from the university, which held the power to end the contract at its whim. Despite the decent pay, the absence of job security, social benefits, or a pension didn't bother my youthful, carefree spirit, particularly since my terms were more favourable than the limited offerings of full-time positions at other institutions. However, as years passed, a realization dawned on me: while my earnings allowed for a comfortable life, they did little to build a secure future. This prompted thoughts of pursuing a Master's degree abroad, lured by the prospect of better remuneration and job stability. Government scholarships, promising secure positions at public universities upon completion, seemed like a good option. Securing one marked the beginning of an intensified experience of precarity, the effects of which linger to this day.

Upon arriving in the UK with the scholarship in late 2011, the Syrian crisis cast a shadow of uncertainty over my funding and future. The prospect of returning to teach in a public university, amidst growing safety concerns, was daunting. Despite eventually returning, immediate employment was not an option, forcing me to accept a disappointing offer from a private university. This experience underscored the pervasive nature of precarity, affecting not just academics but the institutions themselves.

To me, precarity has not been a characteristic of only academic and professional matters; it has also been very much related to personal and national contextual circumstances. I will never forget how stressful and uncertain the year of my MA was. I was in the UK, watching from afar the downward spiral of violence Syria was caught in. From being one of the most stable economies in the Middle East and one of the safest countries in the world, everything was changing so quickly that I could not even comprehend it.

Going back only three months later over Christmas break did not feel like going 'home'. It felt very different, and increased my feelings of uncertainty about what the future might hold. I became filled with doubt about whether I would be able to come back to Syria and take

up my job as an academic upon the completion of my degree. 'What a horrible thing it is to leave your home, not knowing whether you will have a home to come back to after a year' was a sentence I wrote in my diary while I waited for my plane on my way back to the UK at the end of that Christmas break. That sentence became like a prophecy that came true.

After a year of constant worry for the safety of my loved ones and constant guilt for not being with them as they endured the horrors of war, I finally finished my MA in January 2013. Trying to book a flight back to Damascus was such an experience! I remember how, multiple times, by the time I reached the payment stage after choosing the flight I wanted, the flight would be cancelled. So many airlines were cancelling their flights to Syria. My dad advised, 'wait for a few days; things are changing'. When my visa was about to expire and I could no longer wait anymore, my parents told me that going back home was not a good idea, especially since I was going to be employed in a public university, and in a city that was very turbulent. 'Why don't you go to Egypt until it becomes clear where things are heading?' was my dad's suggestion, knowing I did not want to seek asylum in the UK. But those words scared me. I remember weeping, realising that everything 'home' meant to me was no longer. My country was not 'home' anymore?! And the realization that what I had worked hard to build, my academic and professional identity, was a cause of unsafety and uncertainty.

As I arrived in Egypt, things were deteriorating quickly in my country, and this led to more and more uncertainty. My original plan was to stay in Egypt for a few weeks only, but after about two weeks, I realized that I would be staying longer. This meant I needed to find a job, any job. With the help of some connections, I quickly secured a job as an English teacher in an international school. That increased my feelings of uncertainty. It created a kind of identity conflict: I never felt that schools were where I belonged, and for the eight months that followed, I was accompanied by a feeling that this was temporary, and that I had to find a job as an academic. At the same time, part of me wanted to stay in that temporary job and did not want something more stable, because it was a reminder that at some point I knew I would have to leave Egypt and go home. I guess deep down I did not want to establish deep roots and stay in Egypt.

Towards the end of 2013, it became clear that staying longer in Egypt was no longer an option. I had an obligation to fulfil my commitment to a Syrian public university in return for the MA scholarship I'd received. Deciding to return wasn't easy; the prospect of going back to a place that had changed so dramatically while I had been away was daunting, but I felt I had no choice. The move was far from smooth. 'Home' no longer felt familiar, and I found myself adapting to new realities I had not anticipated, ranging from prolonged electricity outages lasting hours or even days, to concerns over one's own safety or the safety of loved ones while performing the mundane activities of everyday life. The bureaucratic hurdles to finalise my paperwork and officially start work at the public university proved both complex and intimidating, dragging on for over two years. Those years marked a precarious period of unemployment for me—the first time since I had completed my undergraduate degree. For nine months, I was jobless, followed by about eighteen months of part-time teaching at a private university, with few job prospects and low pay due to the country's instability. Accepting whatever work was available became my only option.

As I finally commenced work at a public university with a permanent full-time post in Syria in March 2016, the illusion of stability quickly dissolved. Declining salaries, especially in the public sector, inadequate resources, and rampant academic corruption painted a grim picture of my chosen path. Resisting participation in this corrupt system (some of which I cannot write about here) led to isolation, turning the once-desired permanent contract into a symbol of entrapment. My efforts to resign were thwarted, leaving me feeling trapped in a cycle of insecurity and stress. There seemed to be no way out. I had wanted to go back home so badly, only to feel stuck there.

Looking back on it, it seems ironic how the 'stable', permanent contract had become a major source of insecurity and mental and emotional stress. The lack of understanding from those around me, who saw my position as enviable, only added to my distress. 'Why do you want to leave this job? People dream of being university lecturers!' is a statement I heard regularly. Little did people know that the prestigious 'university lecturer' title had started meaning little to me, given the working conditions and the situation of academia in general in the country. Little did they know that I would not have minded the low

salary if I had received appropriate recognition, or if I had been allowed to work with dignity. Their well-meaning advice could not grasp the depth of my disillusionment with the title of ‘university lecturer’ and the conditions of academia in my crisis-ravaged country.

In silence, I persisted, finding solace only in the classroom where my passion for teaching kept me going. Yet, a nagging realization that I couldn’t continue wasting my life lit a spark of a long-held dream: pursuing a PhD. I had always wanted to shed light on some of the challenges that Syrian academics face, so I chose my PhD research topic to be conflict in Syrian higher education institutions. Winning a scholarship to a UK university felt like a victory over my circumstances, offering a glimmer of hope for stability and security. The uncertainty of leaving my country and job, tied to a permanent contract, loomed large. But a new chapter started.

I still remember how I felt upon arriving in the UK for my PhD in 2022. It was as if heavy burdens had been lifted off my shoulders. I felt light like a feather! The initial relief was palpable, only to be replaced by the daunting reality of future career prospects post-PhD. It was during one of the initial meetings with Jamie and my second supervisor Emily that the inescapable question emerged: what are my career aspirations? What comes after the PhD? The question to which I have not been able to find an easy answer yet which opened a window of doubt. Freed from past burdens, yet faced with new uncertainties, my journey continues, a testament to the ongoing quest for fulfilment and stability amidst the shadows of precarity.

Having just started the third year of my PhD journey at the time of writing, I’ve reached a critical point where I must confront and navigate the complexities of building a future career in the UK. This period of reflection and planning is underscored by a certainty: returning to Syria upon graduation does not present a viable path. The dilemmas I must deal with are whether to plan for a career in academia or outside of it; and to pursue a career fuelled by passion and satisfaction, or to adapt to the pragmatic necessity of securing an available position that would provide a work visa. The vision I once held, of engaging in work that provides deep fulfilment, has been clouded by the harsh realities of employment in the academic sphere. Seeing peers and colleagues struggle greatly in securing academic positions after completing their

PhDs has led to a shift in my perspective, leaning towards the acceptance of an opportunity that might ensure my stay in the UK.

This evolving stance is not merely a reflection of personal preference but is deeply rooted in the precarity that accompanies my identity as a migrant academic. The UK's competitive academic environment, coupled with my position as a mature PhD student entering the job market in my forties without prior local academic work experience, introduces a need for strategic compromise. Such conditions not only influence my career considerations but also cast a shadow over my PhD journey, creating what feels like a sense of urgency in decision-making. The shift in my aspirations and plans highlights a broader narrative of adaptation and resilience, characteristic of the experiences of migrant academics in the UK. The intersection of migration, academia, and career prospects in a foreign land has thus become a source of anxiety and contemplation, shaping my path in ways I had not previously expected.

Fatima and Jamie

These narratives were written by two academic migrants based in the United Kingdom (UK). Jamie is a mid-career academic who was born in Aotearoa New Zealand and Fatima is a Syrian academic and doctoral researcher. Jamie is one of Fatima's two doctoral supervisors. In this short piece, we have woven together our personal accounts of navigating work and life as academic migrants. Telling these stories is a way for us to learn more about each other, and our lives before we were supervisor and student. Our narrative concludes with a reflection focussed on how the similarities and differences in our negotiations of precarity and academic migration shape how we navigate being supervisor-supervisee.

While there can be a tendency to locate precarity in the lived experiences of particular segments of the academic labour force, we believe it is valuable to try to understand precarity as a shared feature of contemporary academic work that renders many academics vulnerable. To reprise the title of this chapter, we might say that academics are in it together, differently. However, arguing that most academics are subject to precarity to varying degrees does not mean that vulnerabilities are equally distributed. We have decided to discuss this issue together to

counter any reflex to individualize experiences of vulnerability. So much about precarity and its experiences of loss *could* turn us inward, toward ourselves. We hope that considering our shared experiences of precarity and academic migration can bring us (Fatima, Jamie, and readers) together, and offer insights even when our experiences are unique. To paraphrase Judith Butler (2020), to have experienced precarity means one has the chance to reflect on precarity and the suffering it may cause others too. It is with such a spirit that we have embarked on writing this chapter.

Fatima: Precarity has had its influence on my relationship with my supervisors Jamie and Emily (an established UK academic) and how we have navigated it. When Jamie suggested writing this chapter together, I agreed immediately. I think one of the main reasons was that I felt I wanted to share—with my supervisor before anyone else—the precarity I was experiencing, and I thought writing about it was a great opportunity. What I didn't know at that time was how much I would also be learning about Jamie and about our relationship in the process. Given our differences, I thought that my supervisors would not be able to appreciate the difficulties I face given the academic and professional trajectory I come from. Getting to know them better, and engaging in discussion with Jamie in the lead up to this chapter, I came to realize that coming from supposedly more advantageous backgrounds does not always guarantee more solid ground to stand on for academics. Mobility and uncertainty in employment may remain as key characteristics that academics from different backgrounds negotiate.

However, our narratives do reveal that academics from different backgrounds experience precarity differently. For example, to Jamie, a symptom of precarity has been finding himself constantly on the move. He mentions his realization that to get on a plane and go somewhere new was easier for him than to settle anywhere. This was a source of discomfort as well as pleasure for him, but also related to precarious academic work. Yet to someone with so many travel restrictions as me, this realization may be experienced differently; I would see it as a symbol of freedom. I wish I could get on a plane and go somewhere new as easily. And these differences do shape how we work together, as supervisor-supervisee, during the PhD journey.

One manifestation of this influence has to do with how open to uncertainties associated with research we can be. The past experiences

I have described above have made me more reserved throughout the different stages of my research. I am sometimes reluctant to take any ‘uncalculated’ steps that might lead to unforeseen consequences. While my supervisors may encourage me to explore outside of the comfort zone of the familiar and safe; I tend to favour seemingly safer topics, and more familiar approaches to research. This preference has led me to focus on workplace relations in my research, rather than on the more overtly political dimensions of my topic. It has also made me more reluctant to employ data collection methods that are less familiar in the Syrian context (such as the diary method), to guard myself and my research against unexpected challenges caused by participants’ resistance to new methods. However, my supervisors’ approach has pushed me to reflect on the ways I limit myself, prompting a gradual shift in my thinking. I have started to realize that in a context marked by constant change and instability, my caution is both an asset and a constraint. The pressures of precarity are ever-present; my journey in academia has illustrated that being cautious has helped me endure and kept me feeling grounded, but at times, allowing oneself to navigate uncertainties may be the path forward, even when it feels less safe.

The precarious experiences I have described above have not only influenced how I approach my research and navigate my academic career; they also influence the choices I make about what I share with my supervisors. Negotiating what to disclose feels like an ongoing balancing act. This negotiation involves an awareness of the assumptions they may understandably hold. Yet, with time, I have come to appreciate that Jamie and I share certain layers of experience as migrant academics who have navigated complex immigration hurdles and academic mobility, as well as all the instability that comes with that. In many ways, we share the reality of having to cope with the bureaucratic and personal challenges that come with living and working across borders. However, this shared experience does not erase the ambivalence that marks our interactions; it is clear that each of us manages what we reveal and that we each withhold pieces of our own experiences. We both are aware that revealing too much—or too little—can be fraught with complexities. Like me, Jamie, too, must decide what he is comfortable disclosing. This process is inherently messy, and we all need to find ways of balancing our individual narratives of precarity with the need to maintain

professionalism and personal resilience.

Jamie: At the beginning of this piece, I shared that my own doctoral research was focussed on how precarious conditions of academic work shape doctoral students' experiences of becoming researchers. Writing this piece now, I maintain my interest in the doctorate, but I am no longer in the thick of one myself. I am now a doctoral supervisor who watches, and worries, and tries to take action as these phenomena play out in the sector I work in, and in the lives of students I work with. While some of the stories Fatima has shared of her academic migration journey are familiar ones to me, others are new. All of them matter. I approach doctoral education with the understanding that supervision is never just about supervising a research project, it is always about supporting the holistic development and transformation of an individual researcher. Reading Fatima's reflections once again helped me catch my assumptions about what experiences of migration or precarity might look or be like, or what their differential consequences might be for different scholars. In our supervision sessions together with Fatima's other supervisor, I try to listen deeply, to feel out when a risk might be taken in Fatima's project, and when choosing the safer path might be necessary. Like any teacher, I have limits to my own understanding. Reading Fatima's reflections here and thinking of the conversations we have had around writing this chapter, I notice how Fatima's reflections help me to place some decisions she has made in richer context. I know better now why some options might have felt too risky when she took these decisions. Perhaps a wider implication for supervisors is to reflect on moments of resistance in supervision (e.g. where a student chooses not to follow a supervisor's advice), especially when a student has recently navigated through a precarious situation. These moments might be knotty and full of meanings, and therefore ought to be navigated sensitively by supervision teams. Sometimes it might mean accepting that we, as supervisors, can't fully understand some moments of resistance, but we might be able to in time as we build trust and understanding within the supervision relationship. Another of the issues Fatima and I have discussed in developing this chapter is how challenging it can be for students to negotiate being seen and known by their supervisors as complex people with histories and vulnerabilities, and as professional and capable students who have important scholarly contributions

to make. We have spoken about why it is important that supervisors avoid being intrusive and also avoid approaching students with a deficit orientation upon learning about challenging life circumstances.

One of the things I have learned from working on this narrative project is that talking about the precarity of academic work with doctoral students you supervise is a tricky proposition for academics. As members of institutions, we are often multiply positioned in such conversations. We may have our own current or past experiences of job instability, our discipline might feel under threat due to shrinking government funding or lower student numbers, and yet we also might be hierarchically positioned in institutions which benefit from the wage theft and exploitation of our junior colleagues (Richards, 2021), including doctoral students.

It's also tricky because as supervisors we need to maintain appropriate professional boundaries. The role of supervisor is special and particular. To be available as a teacher, we may need to be choiceful about what remains private and what is shared. I am also aware of the need for supervisors to provide enough certainty and stability for the students, so they feel safe to learn. All of this means that sometimes I'm unsure to what extent I should, or indeed want to, reveal my own personal stories of vulnerability in relation to my academic career with the students I work with. I know that some part of me feels I have a duty to be upfront about the precarious path that may be ahead, and my own navigation can be useful information. And at the same time, as a doctoral supervisor I also feel a sense of duty to maintain a viable idea of the university for myself and for my students; to project a realistic-and-still-hopeful version of the university that is and could be. My students will know that I work from the premise that *we are the university*, meaning that the ways we enact ourselves in everyday situations create the kind of university we inhabit. The university is here and now, never just an abstract entity that acts upon us. Working from this position gives me hope, and maybe spreads hope, that in our day-to-day as supervisors and students, we have the power to create the kind of university we want and need for ourselves and for our world. I'm grateful that Fatima and I have had this opportunity to reflect on who we are as academic migrants, and who we are for each other, as we continue the complex work of becoming doctoral student and becoming supervisor.

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16. Canada: Land of Opportunities for Researchers, but Which Ones?

Farinaz Basmechi

Prologue

For an Iranian feminist activist scholar, like myself, it can be deeply challenging to live in a geopolitical context, like Iran, where feminist work is considered irrelevant, dangerous, or even a form of cultural colonialism. For someone who rejects mandatory hijab laws in Iran, and as a sociologist wanting to explore the nuances of the anti-mandatory hijab movement within an Islamic regime that treats hijab as a core ideological pillar, researching such topics becomes risky.

As a curious researcher passionate about women's rights, I decided to pursue my academic journey elsewhere, in a place where these issues can be studied freely. This, for me, meant accepting the precarious identity of an academic migrant, hoping it would be temporary. My dream was to return home once strong and equipped enough, and when the context allows for serving one's homeland from within. I made the difficult decision to leave Iran and continue my PhD in the United States, not because I didn't belong there, but because I needed the space to think, write, and grow without fear. Like many others, I carried the hope that one day I would go back, not just as a scholar, but as someone ready to rebuild.

Episode One: First Stop, USA

The first part of my diasporic academic journey began in the United States in 2017, where the graduate school stipend was just enough to survive. Stories of homesickness and loneliness are all too familiar for most immigrants, but in graduate school, these feelings take on a sharper edge. You must keep your head above water, maintain ‘good academic standing’ not just for your academic record, but to keep your funding, your visa status, and your life stable.

Working to the side was a necessity, but options were limited. As an international student, I could only work on campus, relying solely on what the university offered through assistantships or fellowships. Still, domestic students weren’t necessarily better off. Many were in the same boat, depending on teaching assistant positions, scrambling for off-campus minimum wage jobs, and often living pay check to pay check. The funding timelines were tight: three or four years to complete a PhD before the money ran out. The pressure to finish quickly and find a job was intense. But for international students, the stakes were even higher. Not finding a relevant job after graduation could mean losing legal status. The dream of securing a tenure track job grew more distant as the academic job market became increasingly competitive and unforgiving.

Still, none of that mattered much to me at the time. I had no desire to stay in the US permanently. I did not want to become a migrant forever, living with my heart in one place and my body in another. I had a clear plan: finish my dissertation on the anti-mandatory hijab movement in Iran, publish my work, and then move to Canada to pursue a second PhD specializing in feminist and gender studies. At the time, the political climate in Iran was not favourable for me to return and work as a sociologist on the topics I found most urgent and compelling. Studying sexuality and sexual violence from a feminist studies perspective became increasingly important to me, particularly in response to the rise in femicides and the surge in sexual violence against women, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic starting in January 2020. As a result, I decided to move to Canada to pursue a second PhD, focusing on the experiences of sexual violence and sexual agency among women in Iran and Canada. This path would allow me both to continue my academic work and to give time for the political climate in Iran to hopefully open

up, enabling my eventual return. My ultimate goal has always been to grow strong enough academically and professionally to rejoin the scholarly community in Iran and become a professor at the University of Tehran, where I had previously studied social sciences, once the long-awaited changes finally come to pass.

The challenges of obtaining and maintaining visas for international students, especially those from countries like Iran, are well known. These difficulties intensified after Donald Trump's first term in office, when policies became even more restrictive. Many Iranian students were granted only single-entry visas, meaning that to visit family or attend international conferences, they risked being unable to return to the US without going through the exhausting and uncertain process of reapplying for a visa. The US travel ban for Iranians, implemented in 2017, added another layer of hardship, virtually eliminating the possibility for the families of Iranian students to visit them. As a result, countless Iranian scholars found themselves confined to the United States throughout their graduate studies, cut off from their loved ones and support networks, waiting in limbo for job offers and eventual green card eligibility to reunite with their families. For many, this meant living in a state of restricted mobility for six to nine years, a heavy and unjust burden.

Although my own situation was different (I was fortunate to receive a multiple-entry visa, which allowed me to travel back home occasionally and reconnect with my family, friends, and hometown), I couldn't ignore the pain and mental health toll that the system imposed on others. I watched friends suffer under the weight of forced isolation, and it became clear to me that the politics of a so-called 'free' country were directly shaping and limiting people's lives and futures.

That realization marked a turning point in my journey. I understood that I needed to relocate to a country where the promise of freedom was closer to reality. I needed to be in a place where politics didn't dictate who could move, live, study, or see their family. Canada, with its relatively more humane immigration policies had a better reputation in terms of support for international scholars, and so it seemed like an obvious choice to me, a place where I could continue my academic work while reclaiming a sense of dignity, mobility, and peace of mind. And so, I started applying.

Episode Two: Second Stop, Canada

After accepting a funded PhD offer from the University of Ottawa's Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies for Fall 2021, it felt like a dream come true. Though the granted monthly salary was not enough to have a relatively comfortable life, I had heard from other scholars in Canada about the abundance of funding opportunities: grants that allowed students to focus entirely on their academic work, without the constant pressure of financial survival. Compared to what I had experienced in the US, it sounded like paradise. 'Lucky me', I thought.

The university offered a wealth of resources, workshops, and clubs to help newcomers navigate the academic environment, learn about available external funding, and plan for the future. True to my nature, I immersed myself in campus life, joining various clubs, including the Feminist Café in my department. There, we heard from two recipients of major grants who had managed to secure funding and were living more comfortably as a result. The session was packed with eager graduate students hoping to learn the secret to success.

I learned that the key was a strong proposal, peer reviews, and feedback from professors, constant revision and editing were essential. But then came the first blow: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funding, a prestigious four-year federal grant that I was considering applying for to be able to afford a more comfortable living, was not available to international students. That was a huge disappointment. However, all was not lost. There was still a provincial grant that international students could apply for, though it required annual reapplications. It wasn't ideal, but at least it was something to work toward.

With renewed resolve, I began drafting my grant proposal. I followed the advice I had received from the community at the school: write the proposal, have peers review it, rework it, seek feedback from my advisor, and consult with grant experts. I revised it countless times before submitting it; fingers crossed.

Three months passed by quickly, and while struggling with economic hardship, I remained hopeful, trying to survive with less than a minimum-wage income working as a teaching assistant in the department. My project, which focused on sexual violence on Canadian

university campuses, felt urgent and important. I was hoping that because of the importance of the topic, it would have a good chance to secure funding. My hopes were high.

The rejection arrived, and as it often is the case with rejections, it made me question everything: was it the project, the proposal, or simply me? To make sense of things, I turned to the statistics: more than 200 provincial grants were awarded at my university that year, but only seven went to international students. It seemed likely that the playing field was not level, and the game was not just about the best ideas. Despite facing the brutal reality of the grant rejection, I kept my hopes high, determined to find other ways to fund my grad student life in Canada.

Episode Three: Wait, What? Just Status?

Determined to defy the grant Gods, I reapplied for it the second year. I hoped the committee would notice that I had strengthened my proposal. Maybe I had been too hasty the first time, I thought; or perhaps the lack of publications and experience in my chosen field had hurt my chances. With this in mind, I threw myself even further into my academic and advocacy work, thinking it might help bolster my credibility and demonstrate my commitment to the issue.

I joined the Feminist Resource Centre at the university, advocating for updates to the sexual violence prevention policies on campus. I worked on committees to create new trainings aimed at changing the rape culture into one of safety and consent. I pushed for mandatory training for everyone on campus and even wrote awareness-raising pieces for newsletters. My academic work followed suit as I penned pieces for feminist journals. I devoted my time and energy to making a difference for the community and the next generation of women on campus. I became so absorbed in the work that I almost forgot about the grant applications. But reality set in. The financial strain was ever-present, and I knew I had to keep pushing forward. I worked on the proposal, highlighting both the community engagement and academic work I carried out over the past two years.

Once again, I updated and submitted my proposal, fingers crossed. But again, rejection!

It was a crushing blow. I had poured myself into advocacy, and I had been so sure that my work would make a difference. But the money? It was not there. All while writing my comprehensive exams and trying to stay focused during the large-scale anti-state uprising called 'Women, Life, Freedom' back in my home country, which had a profound emotional impact on me. My heart was shattered, and I was forced to exist in survival mode. It wasn't easy.

When I received the news in March 2023, the hope for a financial break evaporated. I tried to remind myself that the real reward lay in the impact I was making through my academic work and activism. I focused on the meaningful differences I could create, even if my bank account did not reflect that progress.

Then, during a casual conversation in the kitchen of the Institute, I learned something that felt like a punch to the gut. Another student had received the grant. I was happy for her, truly I was, although the bitterness of envy crept in. When I heard she had received the grant, I had that same thought again: perhaps my project was simply not good enough. Perhaps it was not about being an international student but about meritocracy, after all.

I asked her: 'Are you still an international student?' She responded, 'Oh no! I have permanent residency now'. I was taken aback. 'Good for you!' I replied, 'I applied too, but as an international student, I didn't get it'. She continued, 'Yes, I applied last year when I was still an international student, but I didn't get it either. I couldn't even apply for the federal grant then. But now that I have permanent residency, I am hoping to receive the federal grant this year, and I don't have to worry about renewals or re-applying for three years'.

There it was, yet another piece of evidence that being an international student diminished one's chances of success dramatically. My status was a major structural barrier to accessing funding. Hearing it from someone who had been in my shoes made it all the more real that international students are generally at a disadvantage in competitions due to their eligibility status for external grants. As mentioned earlier, international students cannot apply for SSHRC grants and very few Ontario Graduate Scholarships are available to international students. The land of opportunities revealed its dark side: while resources exist, they are often scarce for international researchers. Learning these things

the hard way can be heartbreaking, exhausting, and demoralizing.

Demoralized I was. By the time the next year came around, I was too tired to apply again. I could not bring myself to do it. Despite the feminist solidarity that always warmed my heart, the financial difficulties were relentless. To survive, I took on a job in retail, alongside my teaching assistant position, which barely covered my expenses. It was a constant reminder of my fragile position as an outsider in a land of opportunities that were not for me or others like me.

Episode Four: Access to Resources and Politics of Connection

In Canada, the academic system, especially in the social sciences, presents a unique opportunity for those studying in the humanities and social sciences fields. However, as discussed in previous episodes, there are minimal opportunities officially accessible for international students within the Canadian context.

It is a frustrating reality in a country that promotes itself as the land of opportunities that there exists a significant financial gap and inequality among graduate students. Citizens and permanent residents benefit from provincial and federal grants during their studies and can secure research assistantships on various projects, giving them both financial stability and academic advancement through publications and networking opportunities. On the other hand, international students often struggle to build connections within the academic community, as they spend long hours working off-campus just to survive. This constant juggling makes it difficult to focus on their projects, leaving them feeling perpetually behind and unable to graduate in a timely manner.

That said, there are always ongoing research projects funded by government or private sector initiatives, in need of research assistants to support the work. In a perfect world, each graduate student would have their own funding, allowing them to focus solely on their research without the immediate pressure to work on someone else's project alongside their own. However, many graduate students, especially those without access to significant funding, work long hours on research assistantships to sustain themselves rather than dedicate their time to their own research. For those international students with legally

restricted work hours and limited access to resources, this can be a double burden.

The idea of postgraduation plans only compounds the anxiety. In the Canadian job market, citizens and permanent residents are often given priority over international visa holders. With the challenging job market, it becomes even more daunting to think about what comes after graduation. I frequently think about the students who didn't get to stay, the ones whose dreams unravelled not due to a lack of talent or commitment but because the structures around them refused to bend.

One of these was a brilliant woman in my cohort, a single mother of two who had moved continents to pursue a PhD in a STEM field. She juggled the demands of parenting, coursework, and lab work with unimaginable grace, often attending late-night Zoom seminars after putting her children to bed. Her research proposal had been highly ranked in departmental reviews, and she applied for every available external grant and research assistantship. Yet, none of them came through. Some were closed to international students, while others prioritized candidates with Canadian residency. Without funding, even daycare became unaffordable, and she quietly withdrew from the program mid-year. She found a full-time job in retail to support her children and began the arduous bureaucratic process of waiting for permanent residency. 'I haven't given up', she told me when we last spoke. 'I just need to pause until the system lets me breathe again'. Her story was not one of failure but of delayed dreams forced by systemic injustice.

Another friend, a newcomer in the social sciences, arrived in Canada full of hope, carrying research questions rooted in her lived experience and a deep desire to produce knowledge that could spark real change. She came from a traditional family that disapproved of her decision to study abroad alone, but she held on to her vision with quiet defiance. Initially, things seemed promising. She was admitted to a well-regarded program, and her enthusiasm was infectious. But the high cost of rent, food, and basic living expenses quickly became overwhelming. She found herself working long hours off the books just to survive, often sacrificing academic participation. She missed her family but dreaded returning home, knowing that doing so would place her back in a constricting environment. Ultimately, the emotional and financial toll

became too much, and she withdrew from the program, returning to her home country, not because she wanted to, but because she simply couldn't afford to stay. When we last spoke, she confided that her health was deteriorating and that she felt more alone than ever. 'Canada gave me a taste of freedom', she said, 'but it didn't give me the support to hold on to it'.

These stories are not exceptional; they are all too common. Yet they are largely invisible. University brochures never mention them. Policy reports do not capture them. But they are crucial to understanding who gets to do research in Canada and who doesn't. These women were not lacking in ambition, intelligence, or resilience. What they lacked was access: access to funding, childcare, affordable housing, and a system that truly understands the complex realities of academic migrants. Their departures were not only a loss to the institutions that failed them but also to the feminist, scientific, and social knowledge they could have contributed.

In the academic setting, success is often measured by the number of graduates and the speed at which students complete their degrees. Administrations pressure students to finish quickly without necessarily equipping them with the tools to succeed in the long term. While completing a degree in Canada might seem like a great milestone, especially compared to the constraints of some scholars' home countries, building a stable future in Canada is a goal many of us had hoped for.

But in North America today, where political climates are shifting toward right-wing, anti-immigrant policies, the possibility of ease in life for migrant scholars becomes increasingly unclear. With many international scholars' home countries becoming less hospitable, it seems as though the dream of academic freedom and stability is slipping further out of reach. Yet, despite these challenges, there is always a faint glimmer of hope that persists. It's the spark that pushes us to channel our anger and fear into action, hope for a better future, not just for ourselves, but for the generations that will follow us.

The struggle of international students and academic migrants is more than just an individual challenge, it is a reflection of broader systemic issues that need to be addressed. The reality is that access to resources in academia is often influenced by political status and geographical boundaries. While the structures may not bend easily, we continue to

push forward, knowing that the work we do can create a ripple effect that will shape future generations of scholars and activists.

Epilogue: Living in Constant Survival Mode and Feminist Solidarity

Although my journey to Canada to pursue a degree in Feminist and Gender Studies, hoping to equip myself with feminist knowledge and methodologies in the so-called land of opportunity, didn't unfold exactly as I had envisioned, I consider myself fortunate to have been surrounded by strong feminist circles. Their support has empowered me to advance my project, and I am now on track to graduate in Fall 2025. These circles were composed of people who genuinely cared for one another, eager to share their experiences and resources. They viewed each other's struggles as their own, committed to finding solutions. Even when solutions were unavailable, they were there to embrace vulnerability and simply listen.

However, I am acutely aware that this support was not a privilege afforded to everyone. I think of those who are introverted, those who hesitate to ask for help, those without access to feminist networks, and especially those who are single mothers. While I tried to stay active in various clubs and associations, which created a sense of community and networking for me, I recognize that not everyone has the same opportunities or resources to do so.

As I was a member of different communities, I became more aware of the responsibility we all have to advocate for those who may not have the capacity to be actively present. The least we can do is think about and truly support those who are struggling in silence. It is through unity and solidarity that we can endure and thrive in a system that often works against us. This is the essence of feminist solidarity: lifting each other up, sharing strength, and ensuring no one is left behind in the fight for equality and justice.

For more on the limits of meritocracy, read Ahmed, Diana, Nur, and Reda in this volume.

For more on (feminist) solidarity, read Amisah in this volume; and Asli Vatansever, 'Survival in Silence: Of Guilt and Grief at the Intersection of Precarity, Exile, and Womanhood in Neoliberal Academia', in Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics*'

Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023), pp. 145–54, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.15>; Emanuela Mangiarotti, ‘To the Center and Back: My Journey through the Odds of a Gendered Precarity in Academia’, in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics’ Narratives*, pp. 155–62, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.16>; and Ladan Rahbari, ‘“Who Deserves a Chair?”: Performative Kinship and Microaggressions in the European Academy’, in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics’ Narratives*, pp. 213–24, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.21>

For more on financial precarity, read Aizada, Amisah, Julio, Reda, and Shilpa in this volume.

For more on (North American) graduate school, read Aida, Aizada, Diana, Ila, Fatima, and Shilpa in this volume.

For more by scholars from Iran, read Rahbari, ‘“Who Deserves a Chair?”’; Tara Asgarilaleh, ‘On Being a “Migrant Academic,” Precarious Passports, and Invisible Struggles’, in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics’ Narratives*, pp. 95–102, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.10>; and Sama Khosravi Ooryad, ‘Inside the Migrant Academic’s Body: Strategic Outsider within Toxic Substructures’, in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics’ Narratives*, pp. 201–12, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.20>

17. G'day Mate! I'm Franka Vaughan, innit? A Mobile Academic's Tales of Visa Woes and Other Misadventures

Franka Vaughan

I was delighted when the editors asked me to contribute to this crucial collection of mobile academics' experiences of migrancy, precarity, and resilience. The editors proposed that my chapter could explore various aspects of the migration process... 'hefty visa procedures, racism, language bias, integration issues, mental and physical health, mobility, and so on'. While all these themes resonate with my own journey, I couldn't help but wonder if my story is unique amidst the countless narratives out there. Perhaps not! But there is value in amplifying diverse experiences. While considering the focus of this chapter, what struck me was how much I expected the hefty visa processes, racism, language bias, integration challenges, and those other dehumanizing hurdles. And so, like many migrant/mobile academics, I strategize and prepare as best as I can for the journey ahead. This chapter weaves together stories of manoeuvring the terrains of prejudicial immigration systems as a migrant from the Global South with a tinge of cynicism and anger. I explore how the tension between preparation and unpredictability defines my life as a migrant academic. The consciousness to anticipate certain injustices and build defences against them, bracing myself for the bureaucracy, racism, and overt discrimination that come with navigating international migration and the border policies ingrained in universities. This preparation becomes a survival strategy to cope with the constant prejudice. Yet, despite my best defences, the emotional toll is still profound when these inequalities manifest, piercing my carefully

constructed armour. Then there are the surprises—the ones I never see coming—that catch me off guard and reveal how fragile my defences really are. No matter how much I think I'm prepared, something always slips through, illustrating just how complex and exhausting this journey can be.

Worthy Be Thy Passport!

For as long as I can remember, I have always expected hefty visa procedures because, for the most part of my life, I have had the wrong kind of passport. In addition, I am too 'Third World-looking' to borrow the words of Ghassan Hage in 'White Nation' (1998), and this, unfortunately, means I attract heightened suspicions and scrutiny during visa applications, border crossings, and interactions with immigration officials. Let's side-track a bit: at its core, I believe people understand that migration happens for many reasons, whether it's reconnecting with family, exploring new places, seeking better livelihoods, or escaping harsh circumstances like disasters, conflicts, or oppressive regimes. Even the consular and immigration officers know that migration isn't just a phenomenon of the Global South—it's a global experience. Yet, migrants from different parts of the world experience migration differently. Usually, those from Western countries are 'expats' while those from the Global South are often labelled as outsiders, intruders, and other derogatory terms. In media portrayals especially, the nuanced motivations behind migration from the Global South often get obscured or altogether lost. Instead, they prioritize the geopolitical implications of immigration, perpetuating stereotypes and oversimplifications. This approach fails to capture the diverse realities of migration experiences and reduces migrants to mere pawns in geopolitical debates, undermining their humanity and agency. Besides being 'Third World-looking', I come from a continent often depicted as a place from which desperate young people are fleeing en masse to America and Europe for a better life. Media stories paint a grim picture of young Africans risking their lives on make-shift boats in the Mediterranean, 'invading' Western shores, only to rely on government benefits and subsidies. African youths are generally framed through this narrative, and so I have come to expect these hefty and racist procedures.

I tell myself: they need to be extra careful! After all, unlike the unpredictability of the other means by which young Africans are apparently invading their shores, regulating the visa process is a space they have much more control over. And so, in my first ever travel outside Ghana, I considered the intrusive and often racist questions by immigration officers as justifiable policing. I had heard the stories even before I had plans of migrating for graduate school. Stories of brilliant students with offers of prestigious scholarships being denied visas. I had been cautioned against choosing certain Western countries for graduate school because it is never enough to just get into the competitive programs nor demonstrate that you have adequate funds to sustain your stay in their country. I learnt quite early from peers and frequent flyers that the visa process to Western countries was not just a regulatory system for immigration. They were, in reality, a battleground where the dignity of applicants with unworthy passports was sacrificed at the altar of bureaucratic efficiency (and inefficiency). From these narratives, I understood that for someone like me, being dehumanized and feeling diminished should be a constant expectation of the visa process.

The question then is: how do you convince, or better still, outsmart a system that reduces peoples' migratory aspirations into checkboxes on an application that you're an individual, not Ghana's GDP or unemployment rate? Well, you imagine yourself as an overworked consular officer whose job is to keep people like you out of the UK. With countless factors out of your control, you still find ways to convince them you will return to Ghana after finishing your program. You reassure them of the safety of UK jobs, reminding them that you are NOT even eligible for the acclaimed government benefits.

In my experience, overcompensating for their impossible demands has been a way to outsmart the system. In our application for a UK spousal visa in 2015, for example, the strategy was to overwhelm the system with more and more information that depicted my 'Third World-looking' self as the potential 'good immigrant' (Shukla, 2016). And so, you go above and beyond, providing all the required documents and more. It is as if you are daring them to find other grounds to refute your visa application, and they usually do! You then negotiate your employability in their country to assuage their fears of you becoming a leech on their social services. You

reassure them: I was partly educated by one of your finest universities, and I do have work experience in your country, so I will be employable. I am gainfully employed now, as evidenced by my bank statements, pay slips, appointment and recommendation letters. Yes, the salary might not seem like much in pound sterling, but it is a relatively good rate for my role and the Ghanaian economy. You emphasize: I returned to my home country within the deadline after finishing my graduate program, thus complying with the constant Home Office emails asking about my post-graduation plans. I am only returning to your country because I fell in love while there. I know you've probably encountered your share of fraudsters, but I would not lie to you about love, so trust me. Since I left, my partner has visited Ghana twice. If that doesn't prove the relationship is serious and genuine, I don't know what does. I am only coming back to the UK because that's where my partner works, and I'm perfectly employable anywhere, so it just makes sense. Oh, and by the way, check out these photos, Skype logs, Facebook and WhatsApp messages, and affidavits—they're all evidence that we're the real deal.

You strip yourself bare, hoping the consular official, with their 'almost God-like powers' (Baffour, 2024), buys your story. The truth is, their judgment often relies on personal opinions and prejudices, rendering your evidence almost pointless (Baffour, 2024). Even then, when they hold onto your passport for months, leaving you in limbo and immobile, you make excuses for them, accepting it as part of their due diligence. And all the frustrations seem to vanish once you get the visa—until you face the same ordeal next time. It is a documented fact that the visa process is gruelling, testing your patience and resilience. Beyond the bureaucratic hurdles and mountains of paperwork, which challenge your creativity and intelligence, there's a deeper struggle at play—a battle for dignity. While navigating the intricacies of visa applications, interviews, and background checks, you can feel the gradual erosion of your dignity. The constant scrutiny, invasive questioning, and arbitrary judgments by consular officers chip away at your sense of self-worth. As you face the mistreatment, contempt, and racism that consular officials often display, you gradually understand that the issue is not limited to a few individuals. It's systemic, and the burden of your supposedly unworthy passport is only the beginning of the challenges that lie ahead.

The overwhelming sadness of it all, in my experience, is the process

of erecting emotional barriers to help you shield against the anticipated onslaught. In our preparations and expectations, we may even go to the extent of shedding aspects of our identities—such as, in my case, relinquishing my Ghanaianess by way of my name—as a means of navigating the system. Was that a coping strategy? Perhaps. It becomes a delicate dance of self-preservation in a system that all too often undermines your worth and dignity.

What's in a Name? Becoming Franka Vaughan!

My strategy of 'accept it and just move on' changed when I returned to the UK in January 2016 on a spouse visa. I was far removed from the bubble-like environment Birmingham University provided me as an international student with a prestigious scholarship. Finding employment was nightmarish! I even applied for unpaid volunteer roles in the international development sector as a way to break into the London job market. My goal then was to find an entry-level job that would keep me occupied and help with living expenses while I worked on my PhD research proposal. But I couldn't even land interviews for the volunteer positions I applied for. I sought tips from every source I could find, asking countless friends and even friends of friends to review my resume and cover letters, trying to ascertain what was missing and how to navigate the system. During one of these sessions, a friend suggested I include my visa status in my cover letters and resume, reasoning that clarity about my work permit might encourage CV screeners to take a closer look at my qualifications and experiences. She believed that my long, foreign-sounding name (Francisca Akua Korantemaa Darfour) might be turning employers off. My name indicates someone without a working visa, which complicates hiring for entry-level positions. Employers typically avoid such complications, so the challenge was to find a way to encourage CV screeners to move my application forward to the interview stage. Indeed, amidst the social gatherings my partner introduced me to in the early months of my relocation, conversations often gravitated toward the London job scene. As the shiny new thing, I found myself at the centre of inquiries about my settling-in process and employment endeavours. Never one to shy away, I openly discussed the frustrations of my job hunt and the perplexing reality of not even getting

interviews. With time, I noticed a pattern at these gatherings: my shared frustrations would spark discussions about their disgust for the system. They were draining but useful as it was during one of these gatherings that a friend of a friend working in the international development sector shed light on a disheartening truth: in blind applications like mine, resumes bearing foreign-sounding names were often rejected without thorough consideration.

So, I devised what I thought then was a rather ingenious solution to my unemployment conundrum: rebranding myself. Since undergrad, everyone knew me as Franka. And before immigrating the second time, I had the foresight to officially adopt my husband's surname. So, why not merge these identities? Franka Vaughan was, thus, born to the world—the name rolls off the tongue; it is sufficiently British-sounding or perhaps delightfully foreign in a 'good' way. With this newfound moniker, backed by a Master's degree from Birmingham University and research-focused internships at esteemed institutions like the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC) and the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, my previous employment stretch in Ghana takes on a different hue. It almost resembles the year-abroad stint that privileged Global North youngsters undertake before they embark on the journey of adulting. Highlight all these accomplishments under Franka Vaughan, and the resume screeners might just be persuaded to move me to the next level: the opportunity to potentially talk my way into a job.

I remember the nervous laughter when I discussed my rebranding strategy with my partner, in a way blaming him for letting my guard down. It was the early months of our marriage, and yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that my proximity to whiteness, along with its inherent privileges, had dulled my senses and compromised my ability to mount the necessary defences. I mean, I had the foresight to change my name officially, but somehow, not the wisdom to adapt my resume to better suit the nuances of the British job market by 'Europeanizing' my name. Reflecting on this now, I know I was desperately trying to cling to pieces of myself I feared were disappearing in my isolation. Living in a university bubble as an international student can be lonely, but the set-up of graduate studies provides solace through group work and budding friendships. It is entirely different starting anew in London—a stark contrast where everything and everyone felt alien. Amidst this sea of unfamiliarity, the

African-sounding names on my resume remained a reassuring constant, a tether to my past in the midst of an uncertain present.

The rebranding strategy yielded almost immediate results, with a flurry of interview invitations flooding in after the alteration of my name on my resume and the deliberate emphasis on my visa status. Yet, as the screenings commenced, a peculiar trend emerged—the expressions of surprise on the faces of some interviewers as they encountered me either on their screens or in-person. Amidst their incredulity came the inevitable question: ‘So, you’re Franka Vaughan?’ Suppressing a chuckle at the absurdity of it all, I would affirm with a gracious smile, fully aware that my appearance likely defied their preconceived notions of who Franka Vaughan ought to be. In such situations, I would smile and whisper to myself: they certainly weren’t expecting your ‘Third World-looking’ self. You win this round, Franka Vaughan!

Of course, changing my name was not enough. Sure, it might have helped me avoid the instant ‘Do Not Interview’ pile, but it didn’t change the fact that systemic discrimination was alive and well. I still had to deal with stereotypes about my background. I remember an interview for an unpaid volunteer gig at an international development organization in London. I mentioned that while I appreciated the opportunity, I would mostly likely leave when I get a job that will pay for my knowledge and experience. The interviewer smirked and, in her best passive-aggressive tone, suggested I let her know when I decided to move on because I got a paying job frying chicken at McDonald’s. I chuckled awkwardly because, you know, it was a ‘joke’. But I spent days wondering what she really meant. Was it just a bad attempt at humour, or was I overthinking it? I am still not sure.

Becoming Franka Vaughan is a clever workaround, but it can’t solve all the other hurdles that come with trying to fit in as a migrant. As time passed, my ironic smile began to fade, and bitterness and anger gradually crept in, accompanied by a relentless questioning of the underlying intentions behind people’s interactions with me. I often found myself seething with frustration, first blaming myself for the distress I seemed to attract, then turning my anger toward the unseen forces behind the system and its agents, whom I held responsible for my misery. It became increasingly difficult to separate the system from its agents, which took a toll on my relationships and mental health. It became dauntingly clear:

no matter how much of myself I strip away in compliance, how much evidence I provided or how diligently I followed the rules, my ‘Third World-looking’ self would always be viewed with suspicion, never given the benefit of the doubt. In most instances, presenting my spousal visa only reinforced their stereotypical narrative—that of a desperate Black woman crossing racial lines just to grab the perks of whiteness. I felt the weight of this judgment in the condescending looks from both sides of the racial divide. With each curious glance or smirk, I couldn’t help but imagine the silent cost-benefit analyses being run on the legitimacy of my relationship—a mentally exhausting and emotionally draining existence.

Over the years, I’ve developed a coping mechanism rooted in indignation, a way to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles and humiliations with a semblance of control. I’ve honed what I call my passive-aggressive banter with the system, where I challenge the rationality behind their requests and expose the double standards inherent in their demands. It’s my way of pushing back, of reclaiming a sense of agency in situations where I feel stripped of dignity. I attribute this shift in my approach partly to my proximity to whiteness and the privilege it affords—the audacity to ask for an explanation without fear of being perceived as disrespectful or crossing some invisible boundaries. I’ve become adept at crafting letters requesting exceptions, armed with evidence that lays bare the inconsistencies in their demands. Sometimes, I even channel my inner ‘Karen’, boldly asking to speak with someone in authority to seek clarity on the often vague and arbitrary requests for more evidence. It doesn’t always yield the desired outcome, but it provides a cathartic release, a means of letting off some of the pent up steam.

Fear and Institutional Indifference: Navigating Pregnancy as a First-Year International PhD Student at Melbourne University

For the two years that I lived in London, I yearned to return to academia every single day! Yes, it undeniably stands as a predominantly white space, but academia has always provided me with a unique haven of belonging and acceptance. Within the ivory towers of learning, I have found solace in a shared pursuit of knowledge and a sense of community among like-minded peers and mentors who, more often than not, value

diversity of thought and experience. Academia is not immune to systemic inequalities despite its semblance of inclusivity. Indeed, the façade of acceptance is underlined by implicit biases and microaggressions. Nevertheless, academia has always been a refuge for me—a sanctuary where my voice is heard, perspectives valued, and potential nurtured, cultivating within me a profound sense of belonging. A space where I can lower my guard and bask in the wealth of knowledge it generously imparts.

And so, securing a full PhD scholarship at the University of Melbourne felt like a dream come true. Not only was Australia a world away from the UK, but it also presented an opportunity to heal and embrace life anew. Despite the typically arduous immigration and renting process, I had cultivated a somewhat 'Karen-like' attitude by then, which helped me deflect much of the expected prejudice. So, when I found myself once again blindsided by the nightmarish ordeal of navigating the university's bureaucracy upon discovering my pregnancy during my first year of candidature, I was overwhelmed with fear and then anger. In the ensuing weeks, I was confronted with the stark reality that, as an international student who hadn't yet exhausted a year of the university-provided health insurance (Bupa), my options were distressingly limited: come up with a staggering AU\$10,000 as a down payment for maternity care or face the harrowing choice of terminating the pregnancy. It was a chilling moment of reckoning that left me feeling isolated and overwhelmed by the weight of what I thought was Melbourne University's callous indifference to my predicament.

But let's rewind for a moment. In the early stages of the PhD program, there was an incessant emphasis on completing the program within the allocated 3.5 to 4-year timeframe. It felt like a constant reminder not to waste the privilege we have been granted. There was zero tolerance for excuses, with tales of those who had completed their programs in record time being paraded as examples to follow. My supervisor's supposedly expedited PhD journey while raising two kids as a single mom circulated as 'inspirational' within our PhD circles. Most of us found these pressure-filled orientations annoying and at best, unhelpful!

During one of these orientations for international PhD students in the Faculty of Arts, one of us stated quite candidly that life happens after the usual emphasis on completion timelines for international

versus domestic students. The conversation naturally segued into the topic of pregnancy during candidature. A lot of us in the room were in our mid-twenties to early thirties. Some were already navigating parenthood, while others, like myself, were contemplating the prospect. My own journey had been marked by the pain of two miscarriages before embarking on post-graduate education. I remember the admin person leading the session (let's call them William), interjecting into the conversation, stating quite emphatically that they would advise against getting pregnant during our candidature. Ignoring our now puzzled faces, he reminded us again of the inflexibility of our programs' timeframes, particularly for international students who lacked the luxury of part-time study options available to our domestic counterparts. While our scholarships did include provisions for paid maternity and sick leave (up to sixty working days apiece), the overarching expectation remained clear: complete our programs on schedule. There were a lot of uncomfortable glances in the room, but no one said anything, at least in his presence. Like many others, I refrained from challenging him, wary of disrupting the delicate balance of settling into a new environment. A PhD is hard enough by itself, and so, you don't want to be tagged within the graduate support circles as the difficult student to watch out for. I, for one, stick out like a sore thumb (visible minority and all that... or very Third World-looking in an Olympiad of Third World-looking types), and certainly didn't want that kind of attention in my first month. But I remember thinking: the audacity of this guy to police our wombs! Surely, he knows that such utterances, even if meant well, are not acceptable, much less in a progressive institution like Melbourne University. Surely, such an institution would have robust policies in place to support graduate students who choose to start a family during their candidacy. At this point, it was easier for me to chalk that uncomfortable encounter to one guy's ignorance, and I did. How naive of me!

I soon found myself grappling with the very scenario William had warned us, international students, about. The search for information on the support I was entitled to, was a nightmare of bureaucratic confusion. But for the support of a few kind people, I might have abandoned my PhD or terminated the pregnancy. The unwavering support of my supervisor and my GP (Jacqui) became a lifeline during what was otherwise a frightening time. William's words haunted me as I navigated the initial

weeks of my pregnancy. How could I put myself in this situation? I had weathered the challenges of visa processes, language biases, and other prejudices by being prepared. I anticipated these obstacles and devised strategies, building fences and developing tactical workarounds. In the face of this unexpected development, I couldn't help but feel a pang of naivety. How could I have overlooked such a significant possibility? Fear, anger, and anxiety overwhelmed me—a familiar sense of nervousness that made me question everything I thought I had under control.

The excitement of the pregnancy, tempered by a lingering uncertainty due to my previous miscarriages, was quickly overshadowed by the daunting prospect of coming up with the steep AU\$10,000 down payment required for maternity care. As I wrestled with this financial burden, the persistent advice from everyone to 'consider my options' only intensified my anxiety. It felt like a cruel irony—being urged to make decisions when the most feasible choice seemed unattainable due to financial constraints. We wanted the pregnancy, but the harsh reality of our financial situation led us to contemplate the unsettling idea of returning to the UK—a thought that filled me with panic each time it arose.

During this time, every person I spoke with—whether from university administration, health insurance representatives (Bupa), practitioners at the Royal Women's Hospital, or the University Health Practice—repeatedly emphasized that it was common practice for hospitals to request down payments from patients who have not yet exhausted twelve months of their private health insurance. Some individuals I spoke with reacted with surprise and impatience, suggesting that the policies were standard and applied universally. That is not necessarily true, as it specifically targeted international students (migrants), since domestic students generally had access to Medicare. I understood why the private health insurer (Bupa) and the hospital management kept spewing their policies back at me, but my real question concerned the university's role, given that my scholarship included Overseas Student Health Cover for the duration of my visa. I kept asking about precedents: surely, I wasn't the first international student to find herself pregnant in her first year of study. What was the university's policy in such cases? Despite my repeated inquiries, the university's administrative responses lacked clarity. With the institution's shift to digital operations, I felt like

I was caught in a game of ‘pass the button’. Each time I reached out for guidance, I was handed off to a different person, forcing me to retell my story and ultimately get redirected back to Bupa. It seemed as though the university took pleasure in deflecting responsibility, leaving me in a continuous loop of uncertainty and confusion.

This growing sense of disillusionment compounded the uncertainty surrounding the fate of my pregnancy, leaving me terrified. None of my previous pregnancies had survived past the fourteen-week mark, and while I held out hope for the charm of the third, our financial constraints required me to consider the possibility of termination more seriously. I had opted for shared maternity care, which granted me access to both my GP and obstetricians at the Royal Women’s Hospital. It was during one of my visits to the Royal Women’s that I was informed that the health insurance issue had been resolved. Relieved, I chose not to ask further questions, assuming that someone at the university had finally resolved the matter. In hindsight, this was my misplaced faith in the university, ignoring the fact that it’s inherently risk-averse and does its utmost to comply with state policies, especially in its treatment of international students.

And so, to be fair to the university, I retraced my steps while writing this chapter to gather information about maternity support for international PhD students who become pregnant during their first year. Unfortunately, my efforts led me back to the same frustrating game of ‘pass the button’, prompting me to contact the Royal Women’s Hospital to understand how my medical expenses were settled back in 2019. The response I received revealed a mix of luck and happenstance: during the early weeks of my pregnancy, the hospital’s accounting team contacted me about the AU\$10,000 down payment. Overwhelmed, I tearfully explained my predicament—the endless back-and-forth with Bupa, coupled with the university’s apparent indifference. A compassionate hospital employee on the other end of the line listened to my story and took it upon themselves to take action. This person followed up with Bupa, eventually securing their agreement to cover my expenses, as, apparently, Bupa wanted to remain in good standing with a powerful partner—Melbourne University. Essentially, my luck lay in speaking with someone who genuinely cared and my connection to a powerful institution. It worked in my favour: I have a beautiful boy who will turn

seven this year, and I completed the PhD on schedule. However, it is not lost on me that my positive outcome was hinged on an individual's empathy rather than a well-structured support system. My question is, what about other international students who might just accept the initial response without challenging it? What happens to them? Surely, Melbourne University can do better than its international students relying on luck and the hope that a compassionate person steps in to make things right.

In conclusion, the journey of a migrant academic is one marked by a duality of preparation and unpredictability. From the outset, we brace ourselves for the known challenges. We build our resilience, crafting a mental toolkit to navigate the hurdles we expect to encounter. Yet, no matter how thorough our preparations are, we cannot insulate ourselves entirely from the emotional and psychological toll these inequalities take on us. The weight of systemic discrimination and the reality of institutionalized biases still sting, even when anticipated. Our readiness can cushion some of the blows, but it cannot wholly prevent the bruises. And then there are those unexpected twists that remind us of the limits of our control. However, within this turbulent landscape, we find moments of resilience and solidarity. Our shared experiences create a network of support that helps us navigate the unpredictable terrain. These connections serve as a reminder that while we may not always be prepared for everything, we do not have to face the journey alone. Ultimately, this chapter serves as both a reflection and a rallying cry—a call to acknowledge the complexities and uncertainties and to embrace the strength that comes from enduring them together.

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18. Who Gets to Have a Child in Grad School? Financial Precarity of the Migrant Single Mother

Shilpa Reddy

I came to the US from India in the Fall of 2015 to pursue a PhD. I was thirty-three years old. I was not thrilled about a prolonged studentship ('at least six years' is what I had heard) in my thirties, especially *after* I had had a ten-year-long career, first as a journalist and then as a college professor of journalism and gender studies. I definitely wanted to boost my career prospects as an academic, and with that, my income. But for me, my pursuit of a PhD was more about an escape to a Western (and affluent) country than it was about pursuing more education. I wanted to get away from the patriarchy (at least the South Asian brand of it) and from many other aspects of Indian culture that suffocated me. I was also frustrated with my low earning potential and the lack of social mobility. My income was low mainly because I was in the humanities/social sciences as opposed to STEM fields, which made all the difference between having low income and high income. The majority of those in non-STEM fields in India struggled to make ends meet as our work was severely devalued and underpaid. The West represented freedoms from all of the above, but most importantly, then, it represented financial freedom and upward social mobility.

In this essay, I want to tell you my story of disempowerment, all the ways in which my move to the US was disempowering and all the structural problems that contributed to it. But that would fill up a book, so I am going to focus on one aspect: financial precarity. For most Indians, coming to the US is a ticket to instant financial security (mainly

because of ‘which’ Indians are allowed to migrate). For me, it was quite the opposite. I choose to focus on the topic of financial precarity partly because it is the most difficult to talk about. Overcoming that difficulty and sharing my story with the world is therapeutic.

In year 4 of my program, I had a child. It’s one of the best things that happened to me, but very soon I also had to come to terms with the harsh reality, that having a child, something I cherished and that added so much meaning to my life, also made me ‘poor’ overnight.

My ‘baby fever’ was triggered by something that happened to a person close to me, which instilled a really strong desire in me to have a family of my own. I was single and had no hope I would find a compatible partner. By having a child, I felt I would have at least half a family. I was thirty-six by then. My biological clock was ticking. The median age at which Indian women have their first child is twenty-one. Was I too late? My financial situation was far from ideal to have a child: my stipend of about \$20,000 a year (before taxes) was my only income and I had no savings or assets. But I did not want to wait till I finished my PhD. Also, I thought, how hard can it be? I had overcome major challenges and obstacles in my life. Also, there were other women having kids in grad school (Note: I use the term grad school in this essay to refer to doctoral programs, not Master’s programs). There were at least three in my department who had had a child or were pregnant during the three years that I had been in the program. If they can do it, I definitely can, I told myself. I come from lower-middle-class India. Hard work and resilience are in my bloodstream.

Though I was single, I did not want to be a single mom—for all the same reasons most women don’t want to be single moms. So, I found someone to have a child with. He was American, and that was intentional. I was avoiding Indian men in the US after having been oppressed by the patriarchy for decades back home in India (including sexual abuse as a child by an uncle, a grossly unequal arranged marriage, and being subject to non-consensual sex in the marriage).

The nature of my relationship with this American man was complicated, so I am going to simply refer to him as my ‘co-parent’. We met, we conceived, we moved in, all in a short span of time. When I was about two months pregnant, I informed my then advisor and graduate director about the pregnancy and asked them about the maternity leave

I would be eligible for. I was aware, as a sociologist specializing in the area of family, that the US did not have federally mandated paid parental leave, and that it was up to employers what they offered their employees. Since my university was a top public university and had about 15,000 employees, I figured it can't be too bad. Well, it turned out it was.

I learnt that grad students are not really eligible for parental leave because we are not 'employees'. Interestingly, for many other purposes, grad students are indeed employees. We work as research assistants, teaching assistants, or instructors of record, and get paid for it. We pay taxes. We receive university-provided health insurance just like all other employees. Even our tax documents show us as employees. The email I received from the graduate school stated that grad students had two options. The first was to 'request a leave of absence for one or two semesters' and during that time, I would not be a full-time graduate student and not have university-provided health insurance. And, wait for this, because I am an international student, I would also be 'required to leave the country'. In other words, if I picked this option, not only would I not get paid leave, I would have to go back to my home country to have the baby, with no income, no health insurance, re-apply for student visa, and return to the US after one or two semesters, all at my own cost. At *so* many levels, this 'option 1' was not an option for me. The second option was to request a 'parental accommodation policy' which will give me six weeks of leave. However, it was not *really* a leave. My workload as a research assistant would not change during the semester in question. It would just be front loaded and back loaded so that I did not have to work for six weeks. It is like an employee being told, 'Sure, you can take 6 weeks off to have a child, but you need to come back and do all the work that you didn't do when you were away'.

So, one can argue that, in effect, option 2 is not really *paid leave*. It is not even *unpaid leave*. Since it is not even *leave*. But, for a moment let's assume the six weeks was *actual* paid leave and put those six weeks in perspective. That is six weeks to cope with one of the biggest transitions in life, for creating human life and for caring for that life during its most vulnerable and dependent phase. For those of you who don't already know, the US is the only country in the Global North that does not have federally mandated paid leave. In comparison, Sweden offers almost sixteen months of paid leave per child; Norway offers forty-nine weeks;

the UK offers thirty-nine weeks; and Canada offers about twelve months. Many countries in the Global South, despite their low GDP, have paid parental leave policies that put the US to shame.

Anyway, my advisor, like me, felt that the university's policies on parental leave for grad students were ridiculous. He advocated on my behalf to get an entire semester of paid leave. He was unsuccessful! Apparently, the department could not do much, as they had to follow university policies which didn't allow for anything better than what I was offered.

I spoke to other grad students who were pregnant or had just had kids. And I realized that none of them took the sh*tty option 2 (of 6 weeks 'leave'). They picked option 1 (a leave of absence for one or two semesters)! And that is when I had the big realization: the women in my department who were having children during grad school were situated *very* differently than me. 1) They were all US citizens living and having a child in their home country and so, taking a leave of absence did not require them to leave the country. And relatedly, 2) they were not dependent on their stipends for basic needs like rent, utilities, and groceries. They had spouses who took care of those, at least when they were on their leave of absence. Nor were they dependent on the university-provided health insurance. They were on their spouse's or parents' employer-provided health insurance. So they could afford to take a leave of absence for one or two semesters and let go of their stipend and university health insurance for that period.

I felt stupid for having told myself earlier that 'if they can do it, so can I'. Silly me! I thought they were in the same boat as me in facing the challenges of having a child while pursuing a PhD. Clearly, their boats were bigger and safer than my precarious little boat. In fact, one of these women ended up taking a leave of absence for two years when she had her child. Good for her for prioritizing her needs and those of her child. Now, when I look back, I realize I didn't and still don't know of a single international student who had a child while being a doctoral student, and definitely not someone without a partner who would foot basic living expenses.

Anyway, I took the shi*tty, but only realistic, option 2 of six weeks' 'leave' and had the baby. The birth was traumatic. I needed to undergo an emergency C-section to save the baby. And then a few days after the

birth, I experienced complications from the C-section surgery that took me back to the hospital. It took three weeks to fully recover from those complications. My mom came from India just before the birth and stayed for two months. Infant care was split three ways (mom, me, and my co-parent) for those two months. I stayed home. My co-parent had to go to work. We managed. It was the honeymoon phase of parenting. The sleep deprivation and the intense demands of caring for a newborn were overshadowed by the excitement of a new baby. After my mom returned to India, it was just me and co-parent—two individuals with full-time work commitments responsible for keeping a little human alive, a little one that was completely dependent on us. After a few months of not sleeping enough, and when showers and sitting down to eat became a rare luxury, I knew I needed help. Mothering had gone from mostly a joy to mostly a burden.

I looked around and noticed that working parents were sending their infants and toddlers to daycare, which made sense. How can one be expected to work full time *and* care for an infant at the same time without any help? I too wanted to send our child to daycare. I did my research and realised that, unlike these other parents, I could not afford it. Besides the fact that parents in the US don't have a right to paid parental leave, the US also does not have good quality publicly funded or even subsidized daycare. Daycare is completely privatized, and therefore expensive. My co-parent was a very capable and reliable father, but the nature of my relationship with him was more transactional (we made each other parents) than one of a 'family'. So all our expenses were split down the middle, be it rent, utilities, groceries, or child-related expenses. If we were going to send our child to daycare, I would have to pay half the daycare tuition, and that was more than I could afford.

Though my co-parent, our child and I were not a 'family' in the intimate sense, the equal splitting of expenses was a hard pill to swallow. As per the patriarchal lower-middle-class Indian norms of the 1980s and 90s, my parents raised me and my sister to be future homemakers or secondary breadwinners at best. There was always going to be a husband who would come into the picture in our adult lives who would be the breadwinner or at least the primary breadwinner. My income would be supplementing his, a 'nice to have' for the family, a little extra. My primary responsibility would be to raise the kids, cook, clean, be

supportive of and prioritize my husband's career (since that would be the main source of our family's income) and be the moral compass of the family. This is primarily why my parents did not invest in a STEM education for me and my sister. STEM was for the boys who needed to be more ambitious in their careers, as they were going to be the primary breadwinners.

But now I found myself in a Western, *relatively* gender egalitarian society (at least in terms of educational investment in children by parents) where women and men were both raised to and expected to bring home the bacon. Having to be both the breadwinner and homemaker was something I came to terms with after I ran away from my (male-breadwinner, female-homemaker based) arranged marriage when I was twenty-three. After that, I prioritized my career over finding a man, disobeying my parents and my culture in the process, and I worked hard to make the most of my non-STEM education to become financially independent. This included pursuing higher education to boost my career prospects. I had made peace with the fact that no man was going to come into my life and pay my bills. However, *during* the pregnancy and our child's infancy when my time and energy for breadwinning was severely limited by the fact of my biology (since I was the one, and not my male co-parent, who could carry and nurse the child), I really wished I didn't have to continue to fend for myself financially.

What made the pill harder to swallow was that my breadwinning PhD work at that point, which I did by stealing precious hours from what was rightfully my baby's, earned me an income (my stipend) that was less than the 'living wage' and the 'minimum wage'; and with a child, it was close to the 'poverty wage'. There wasn't much left after paying my share of rent, groceries, utilities, etc. Daycare expenses were clearly not within my reach.

Further, there was a lot of discussion in my department about stipends being too low. But it was frustrating that there was no acknowledgement of the fact that the low wages negatively impacted international students, all from the Global South, a lot more. We didn't have the financial and social support systems that people who lived in this country all their lives had. American students in my department supplemented their meagre stipends in many ways. Some held part-

time jobs (international students didn't have work authorization to do so). Older students who had careers before grad school had savings and/or working spouses supporting them. Many younger students had parents supporting them.

The difference in parental support between migrants and non-migrants, or rather between me and almost everybody else in my social circle (which then was composed almost entirely of middle-class Americans), was not always immediately apparent to me. But one day, when my son was an infant, an Indian American classmate in her mid-twenties, who was a child of Indian immigrants, invited me to her housewarming ceremony. Not her *parent's* housewarming. But *her own* housewarming. With financial help from her parents, she had become a proud house owner in her mid-twenties! The advantages a child of an immigrant had—by virtue of being born, raised, and educated in the Global North with parents who are able to financially support them—over a migrant/immigrant became more apparent to me. Moving to the US just one generation early made such a big difference!

Like most migrants from the Global South, including international PhD students, I was not going to receive any money from my family in India. Instead, I was expected to and I expected myself to send money home from my meagre stipend. Remittances travel in one direction: North to South. Not the other way around. I didn't have savings in India. And even if I had, given how currency exchange works, many years of savings in India would barely buy anything here. I found the language to articulate the difference in the direction in which wealth moves for migrants vs non-migrants only a few years later. While discussing remittances, a white American sociologist friend who had a Cuban immigrant wife pointed out: 'for people like me, wealth moves down the generation. For people like my wife, wealth moves up the generation'.

Back to the baby! Since I couldn't afford daycare, I kept our son home, and naturally, I wasn't able to make much progress on my PhD benchmarks. The six weeks of 'leave' had long passed. I did the best I could, while dealing with time stress and financial stress. I would try to read for my comprehensive exams while I was nursing, which felt like the only time I got to sit down. But I would be so tired, that I would often doze off while nursing—baby in one hand, book in another. When my son was about six months old, I was forced to give up breastfeeding,

as formula was less time-consuming. It felt like I was failing at both parenting and making progress on my PhD. I soldiered on.

There were some Americans I knew who did not send their kids to daycare, either because they couldn't afford it or because they did not need it. In these cases, family members, especially grandmothers, were helping. Unlike me, these new mothers had lived in this country all their lives, so their family and friends were nearby, or at least in the same country. My parents, like most Indian grandparents, would have helped a lot. It is the norm in India, as in China, for grandparents to take on significant childcare responsibilities of grandchildren. But my parents, along with my inner circle of relatives and friends, were 8,000 miles away. So, I couldn't even get family-provided unpaid childcare.

When our child was about eighteen months old, my co-parent and I realized that our arrangement was just not sustainable. I needed to spend more time working on my PhD and we both needed to sleep more. So we decided to send our child to daycare and figure out a way to pay for it. He took up a second job. I started looking for some part-time jobs that I could do which did not require work authorization. This took away more time from my PhD work. My post-PhD career and income, which was the light at the end of the grad school tunnel, was pushed further away. The supposed 'temporary' poverty of being a student didn't seem temporary at all.

By the time our child was three years old, my relationship with my co-parent had progressively deteriorated, thanks mainly to money-related disagreements. It had reached a point where living together was not a viable option. We decided to move out into separate residences. And that was another big moment of truth as I realized how very precarious my life situation was. The financial benefits of living with another person had come to an end, which meant my living expenses would go up, while my income remained the same. Unlike the (American) parents in my social circle, including my own co-parent, who had houses, parent's houses, cars, savings or other assets, I had nothing. Nothing I could fall back on or sell or use to get me and my son through my remaining years as a student parent. Like most international students, I came into this country with three suitcases, the standard economy baggage allowance of international airlines—two checked bags, fifty pounds each; one carry-on bag, fifteen pounds; one personal item.

Not only did I not have anything to fall back on, I also had nobody who would or could support me financially. I was on my own with a three-year-old child who would live with me half the time. There I was: a highly educated and academically accomplished person who found myself in a situation in which I could either afford to continue paying my child's daycare or my rent, but not both. Daycare was not optional as both my co-parent and I had to work.

The determined problem solver that I was, I tried a few creative options where I didn't have to pay rent or utilities. Everything had moved online due to Covid-19, so I could work on my PhD remotely from anywhere. My co-parent and I had equal custody, so moving away from Baltimore, where my co-parent and I lived, was going to be inconvenient for all three of us, but I had bigger problems on hand. I knew about a rural commune three hours away from Baltimore that took care of housing, food, and health insurance in exchange for a certain number of hours of labour every week. I decided to give it a try. After staying in the commune for five weeks, I realized it was not going to work out for two reasons. They did not have reliable internet. And I couldn't make much progress with my PhD if I was working the hours they required me to, while also caring for my son.

When the commune didn't work out, I put all my stuff in storage and decided to live in India with my parents for six months every year. I could then save on living expenses for half the year. Our son would spend three of those six months with me and the other three with his dad in the US. I went to my parent's house in India without my son first, but had to return in three months because the Covid situation was a lot worse in India than the US. It made more sense to live in the relatively safer country, the US (remember those days when there was a real daily fear of dying of Covid!?). Also, being separated from my son for those three months was tough on me, him, and my co-parent.

Becoming a mother was supposed to enrich my life. But I was too stressed to enjoy motherhood. I couldn't even manage to figure out a living situation where I could see my child every day (or for him to see both parents every day) since the only way to achieve that was for me to rent a place near my co-parent's house. I couldn't afford to rent even a *studio* apartment.

I considered other housing options including living in a trailer and

living in my advisor's basement. None worked out. I lived temporarily here and there for a while, including in a friend's house. During this time, I continued to spend hours every day looking for and applying for jobs. I had my green card by then, so I was authorized to work. I found exactly one job. It was a year-long full-time visiting instructor position four hours away from Baltimore. The pay wasn't great. Co-parenting across that distance sounded stressful. But it would provide some financial relief. So I took a leave of absence for a year from my university and took up the job. The light at the end of the PhD tunnel was now pushed further away. My son continued in daycare in Baltimore while I travelled every other weekend for an entire year to be with him. As I didn't have a car, I had to take the train which meant the travel time was closer to seven hours. One way!

It was, again, emotionally difficult for me and my son to be separated from each other, and my co-parent had more childcare on his plate than either of us wanted. So I was glad when the year was finally over, and I returned to the Baltimore area to continue working on my PhD. I was back to living on a stipend but, fortunately, our child was four by then, old enough to go to (free) public school, which meant that I could finally stop having to pay for daycare.

Without daycare expenses, I could afford rent. I started looking for communal living spaces due to their lower living expenses. I finally found one about an hour from my co-parent where I was able to rent a comfortable room in a large house. It was a group housing situation, but the other residents were like-minded age-peers as opposed to college students (I was forty years old at that point), and I was happy to live with them. My child and I shared the room. It was good value for money. And I resumed work on my dissertation. It was nice to be able to have the time to focus on my dissertation again. I needed one more year and I would be done. So I felt a bit hopeful, and it looked like the end was in sight.

But then a few months into the semester, I received an unexpected email from my department. I was told my funding would not be renewed the following semester. Since 'funding was guaranteed only for the first five years', the department was not obligated to give me more assistantships. I felt crushed. I was too upset to sleep that night. Without

an assistantship, I would not receive a stipend, my only income, and I didn't have any savings. It was also hard to believe that the department would do this to me, given that I was so close to finishing. I just needed one more semester of funding. I was up all night and by morning, I had written and sent out the email below to my grad director asking her to reconsider the decision.

Dear xxxx,

I would like to share with you why my PhD is taking so long. My fellow grad students and I are often told directly or indirectly to finish as quickly as possible, and reminded repeatedly that only 5 years of funding is guaranteed. So it feels like the department is blaming students for taking too long to finish.

In my case, at least, the reason for taking so long has more to do with money than anything else. I had a child in year 4 of my program, and the department did not offer parental leave of any kind—a sociology department that produces scholarship on work-family conflict, family policies, housework, and childcare could not provide any paid leave for its grad student.

I understand that these policies are decided at the university-level, rather than the department. But for a new mother who is torn between caring for an infant and having to earn a stipend to pay the bills, that's just a technicality. Because the stipend was so low, I couldn't send my son to daycare, and so I had little time and energy to make much progress on PhD benchmarks. Later, when my son was 1.5 years old, I decided to send him to daycare, which meant I had to prioritize earning money to pay for it (since the stipend is too low even for basic expenses). All these slowed down progress on my dissertation.

Last year, I took a leave of absence to take up a visiting instructor position, mainly because that was the only way I could afford daycare. If the stipend was higher, I would not have had to take up that year-long job. And in the first 5 years of my program I was an international student on an F1 visa, which meant I was legally restricted from taking up any jobs outside the assistantship. So I had no opportunities to save money. It feels like I am being penalized for wanting to have a child, and wanting it while living in this brutally capitalist country.

I am devastated that after having worked so hard for so long (not just during the PhD program, but even to be able to come to this country) and being so close to finishing, I may not be able to.

Clearly, I have no choice but to prioritize making ends meet and care for my young child over getting a PhD degree. So if I don't have

an assistantship, I would have to take up a full time job, which means I wouldn't have time to work on my dissertation since parenting plus full-time employment is already more than a full plate.

This email is not necessarily a response to the decision you had to make as a grad director. It's not personal. The problems I am facing are clearly systemic—a system that is rigged against people with few resources and multiple intersecting disadvantages.

– Shilpa

After sending this letter, which I thought made a strong case for giving me an assistantship, I felt hopeful. I thought I did a good job of explaining my situation and calling out systemic problems, and that would make them do something, help me in some way. It is a sociology department, after all. Half the department conducts research in the area of social inequalities. I was nervous but optimistic as I waited to hear back. I waited and waited. No response. Nothing.

After two weeks, I finally received the email below:

Dear Shilpa,

While I appreciate you taking the time to send this email, the position of the graduate program and department must remain the same: Given that funding **is not** guaranteed for students in their fifth year and beyond, we are **not able** to provide you with one additional semester (Spring 2024) of departmental funding. Several students, including yourself, have been told that they should not expect funding beyond this fall, and we would not be able to continue to operate as a department if we did not follow through on those messages.

–Dr. xxxx

I was outraged! My stress levels hit the roof. My advisors tried to get me an assistantship but were not successful. If you think about it, the assistantship pay for a semester is pittance. And yet that small amount of money meant everything to me, because I needed that for basic living expenses. That money was the difference between finishing the PhD when I was so close, and abandoning it.

I soldiered on. I borrowed some money from my sister in India that would get me through for about two months. And then just when I was running out of money, I got financial relief out of the blue from

an unlikely source. It wasn't a job. It wasn't my department. It wasn't the government! Fortunately (or unfortunately!), it was the man I was dating that came to my rescue. This man, who is now my husband, gave me some money after he learnt about my financial situation. I say that it was 'out of the blue', because at the time that he made that bank transfer, it had been only nineteen days since we had first met. And when I say 'met' I mean via video calls. We found each other online, and we had not yet met in person because we lived at opposite ends of the country. To this day, it is hard for me to believe that I accepted money—with which I paid my rent and bought groceries that semester—from a man I didn't know existed nineteen days earlier, and whom I had not even met in person! I was clearly at my wit's end.

I finished my dissertation at the end of that Spring semester and defended it in the summer. The loooooong PhD journey had finally ended, nine years after I started it. I was out of the tunnel.

We hear a lot about how resilient migrants are. I guess I was resilient too by not quitting my PhD program when things got tough. But I wish I didn't have to be resilient. My husband calls me a survivor. In the end, he points out, I finished my PhD and I had the child I wanted to have. He says he fell in love with me because my story was one of liberation and survival; and my life as a grad student in the US is also a testimony to the survivor in me. He is proud of me and thinks I should also feel proud of myself for not giving up, despite the odds. I may feel pride at a later point. But, at this point, all I feel is bitterness—bitterness about the fact that social structures and policies are rigged against people with the fewest resources.

I learnt the hard way that doctoral programs in the US are not just unnecessarily long (for example, I had to do a second Master's as part of my PhD which I neither needed nor wanted), but they are lengthy by design to exploit the cheap labour of doctoral students. *I learned the hard way that these lengthy doctoral programs are meant for dependents, not those with dependents.* In a more equitable world, the fact that most migrants from the Global South have dependent family members (besides children, if any) and don't have family and friends who can supplement their stipends would justify giving them higher stipends than non-immigrants, in an effort to level the playing field.

US universities attract more international doctoral students than any other country, and almost all these students are from the Global South. These PhD programs are a necessary pipeline to get faculty positions in US academia, since it's almost impossible to break into US academia with a Global South—PhD. But to what extent are these universities inclusive of the migrant students? To what extent are these students being set up for success both in the PhD programs and in eventually joining academia? To what extent is US academia creating a level playing field to ensure that migrant students have as good a chance as the majority non-migrant students in this insanely competitive job market? There are many ways in which the US academia fails or wrongs migrant grad students, but I want to draw sharp attention specifically to the monetary aspects by asking the following questions:

Who can afford to spend six to eight years of their adult lives in grad school earning peanuts?

Who is likely to have pre-existing savings that can supplement these pathetic stipends?

Who is and is not allowed to work part-time jobs to supplement the low stipends?

Whose parents have the ability to financially support their adult children in grad school?

Who gets to take a leave of absence to have a child?

Who gets to take a leave of absence to care for ailing dependent parents?

Who has the financial and social resources to raise children while in grad school?

Which students have the least burden of dependents to support?

Who is likely to finish the PhD?

Who is most likely to get and take up the majority of faculty jobs, jobs high in status and low in pay?

Whose parents have the ability to pass down wealth to their adult children in low paying faculty jobs ?

Given the rapid adjunctification of US academia, who can afford to teach?

And finally, what does all of this mean for the future of the supposedly meritocratic US academia?

For more on motherhood in academia, read Anonyma, Amisah, Franka, and Julia in this volume; and Emanuela Mangiarotti, 'To the Center and Back: My Journey through the Odds of a Gendered Precarity in Academia', in Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023), pp. 155–62, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.16>; Lydia Namatende-Sakwa, 'Wiping the Smudge off the Window: The Darkest Time as a Student in Europe', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 183–90, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.18>; and Vera Axyonova, 'A Journey to the "Self": From Precarity as Non-Belonging to the Search for Common Ground', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.01>

For more on financial precarity, read Aizada, Amisah, Farinaz, Julio, and Reda in this volume.

For more on surviving (North American) graduate school, read Aizada, Farinaz, Franka, and Fatima in this volume.

For more by scholars from India, read Ila in this volume; and Sanam Roohi, 'Unbelonging as a Postcolonial Predicament: My Tryst with European Academia', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 9–20, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.02>

19. One in Four.

Recollections of Years of Infertility and Academic Precarity

Anonyma

I am in the hell that is fertility treatment again. Some days it's just as bad as the five years trying to conceive my first child. Others, I'm able to bring myself away from the swing of hope and grief for a hypothetical future that might never be and focus on the present moment: I have one wonderful child already. Oh, and a full-time, permanent, comfortable job in academia – the very last academic job I applied for. I have, today, two things I spent years fearing I'd never have. This essay records memories of these years as they flood my body when little reminders come up: a premenstrual cramp here, a job advertisement there.

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The combination of infertility and precarity last time broke me. I'd like to think it was a phase meant to teach me a valuable lesson but in truth it made me a worse person. Everything but the rhythm of my monthly cycle, physiological or medicated, seemed unreal. I was left with a hollow, sinking feeling in my chest every time I heard a friend's pregnancy announcement or saw a woman with a belly on the street. The hole in my middle sucked out all capacity to feel joy or empathy for others. 'Maybe you could accept that it's okay to be a bitter cunt for a while', my therapist told me between the second and third IVF cycles when I complained I hated everyone. We laughed and it helped a little, but I still think I'll have to spend my life atoning for the misery I had

spread on the world in those years.

Mostly I was resentful about the unfairness of it all. I had done everything right and nothing was going my way. It wasn't like I had been oblivious to the biological clock when I was younger; I knew I wanted a baby since high school. It was a bit of a joke; it scared the life out of my first two boyfriends and their families. Reason prevailed, however. I finished my studies, actively considered starting a family with a third boyfriend, notwithstanding the lack of maternity benefits I'd face as a PhD student on a stipend rather than on an employment contract.

It stopped being a joke when I met my future husband at thirty-one. We let go of contraception some months after I'd finished my PhD and scored a visiting professorship with my department. I enjoyed teaching, seeing papers from my PhD published and getting dopamine hits from Google Scholar citation notifications. We had a wonderfully rich social life, with dinners, beers, brunches, and picnics. I remember staying in my office that summer until 10 p.m. on a Friday night to submit a manuscript, then walking across town to join my husband and friends for drinks by the river. I was on top of the world.

I felt nostalgic for that moment as it was happening because I knew that life wouldn't last. The clock on my visiting professorship was ticking, and there was no chance of finding a job, academic or otherwise, in the town my university was at. Our department had a policy of not hiring its own graduates, so I had to start applying widely. In Europe, this meant the United Kingdom—one of the few markets open to hiring outsiders. The trouble was, I knew I didn't like the country. I had vivid memories of a language study trip I took in the 1990s and the whole place just seemed... bleak. Plus, Brexit added a new layer of uncertainty. 'You can't always get what you want', said my mother when I received two job offers in England. One was a permanent lectureship (assistant professorship) at a top uni, at a leading department in my field, in a pleasant enough town with a reasonable cost of living. The other was a highly specialized four-year postdoc in Oxford. (Oxford!)

'Take the lectureship, don't be mad!' said a misogynist professor I didn't like. 'Take the postdoc! The teaching on the lectureship will suck the life out of you', said a friend on a UK lectureship. 'Not an obvious choice', said most others. In the end, I chose the postdoc at Oxford for several reasons. One was my ambiguity about academia. I was lucky to

have had private sector experience in a thriving science-adjacent field that might understand a prestigious postdoc stint on my CV, should I ever want to make ‘real money’. A lectureship would be full-on ivory tower. But the bigger reason was family planning. My husband was staying behind. There was little hope he’d be able to secure a visa for the UK to come visit—we weren’t married yet and had been living together for only a year, making our relationship non-existent in the eyes of the UK Home Office. I knew I’d have to fly back if I wanted to see him, and if we wanted to conceive, my visits would need to be timed to match the few fertile days in my monthly cycle. I was practical enough to realize that ovulation wouldn’t wait until the term is over; the demands of a teaching schedule looked hard to square with flying back for 5-7 days every ovulation. My future boss at Oxford, on the other hand, understood and accepted my request to work from abroad one week a month to try to make a baby.

* * * * *

I didn’t know at the time what a rock my boss would become in my fertility struggle. My monthly commutes ended up lasting years and during this time, he certainly got more than he signed up for: a depressed, hateful postdoc, doing her work like a sulky teenager, periodically crying in his office and lashing out at others. A bitter cunt, in other words. ‘Oh no, no, no’, he just said after I’d confessed I’d thrown a tantrum aimed at the departmental administrator who was unable to arrange for water barrel delivery to our offices to continue. Later, I understood what was behind my outburst: it was just weeks after I’d found a toilet full of blood after my first failed IVF cycle. If this big thing in my life wasn’t going right, why couldn’t people at least do their jobs and make the other, small things work as they should?

The joy in his voice when I finally called him five years later, after the third cycle, to say it worked was touching. I’d like to think he popped champagne, or a can of Guinness, to celebrate, a thousand miles away, locked down in his home office like the rest of academia. For years, he focused calmly on the next practical thing to do, standing firm among my emotional ups and downs and physical symptoms, and the unpredictability of my work output. I only saw an unguarded emotion—

fear—in his eyes once, when, after the first cycle, I mentioned in passing I'd been sexually assaulted by a physiotherapist during prep for the cycle. 'Don't worry, that was just so minor compared to everything else that happened last month!' I added quickly, because it was true. A brief misplaced fingering, even if coming from someone who's pinning you helpless by holding your coccis in their hand, was nothing compared to the violence of the weeks of IVF.

That first time hit me like a bulldozer. I was no stranger to the effects of hormonal medication by then—a gynaecologist said she wouldn't refer me to a fertility clinic unless I took three cycles of ovulation-boosting hormones, which I did and which made me feel like I was going mad. You know how TV portrays the onset of psychosis, with buzzing neon lights and everyday objects jumping back and forth in front of the protagonist's eyes? That's how I felt in my Oxford bedroom. The room kept disappearing into a tiny little dot at the end of a tunnel, and I wasn't sure I wouldn't wake up blind the next day, but I kept taking the pills. Doctor's orders. If I had to suffer a bit to succeed, so be it—I knew the drill from writing my PhD. I also had experience with progesterone following a few rounds of artificial insemination—progesterone, the hormone responsible for many of the stereotypical pregnancy symptoms: irritability, anxiety, restlessness, poor concentration, forgetfulness, and heightened emotions.

Still, the IVF was just next level. The pain of constant prodding, pricking, and pressing of vaginal exams, ultrasounds, ovaries expanding to the point of bursting (and the fear of knowing they sometimes do); the injections you have to give yourself every night; the anaesthesia catheter in your arm; the way you must become a compliant piece of meat on a stretcher bringing you to and from the operating theatre; the cramps after a needle pierces each follicle in your swollen ovaries to retrieve the eggs during the 'puncture'—all of that was new. What was also new was the stress of the daily calls to the embryology lab to check on our embryos—on the first day they tell you half of them didn't fertilize, by the third day half of them will have died, on the fifth day they say, 'there's one top quality embryo and one, well, not so good'. If you're lucky, that is—these days I'd kill for two embryos but back then I was thirty-three and all the young women on the ward had somehow produced three or four. (That was also new—for the first time in my

life someone told me: ‘Your results are not very good’. Just like so many ‘good students’ who’d gone to academia, I’d never heard it at school or at work. Not even in peer review—at least with Reviewer 2 there’s always the option to work harder, get better, try elsewhere. When it’s about your oocytes, no such luck.) Then the transfer itself, where—once again—a needle pushes through your cervix, while you’re still sore from the retrieval. And, of course, nothing could have prepared me for the progesterone-heightened intensity of the two weeks from transfer until the pregnancy test.

Mercifully, in my case, it was only ten days because, despite the truck load of progesterone, I got my period. I could start the grieving process four days early, which was still easier than the liminal state of the luteal phase. If, in a normal, unmedicated menstrual cycle I typically spent 20% of my days with the ‘what-if-I’m-really-pregnant-this-time’ program running in the background of my mind, now it was 90%. Even my loving, supportive husband would think I was mad if I admitted to the true number of times a day I thought to yourself ‘am I, am I not?’.

I questioned every move I made: did I sit down too fast? Was this door too heavy to pull, did it hurt the foetus? Will imagining two lines of the test jinx my luck? What about imagining my husband, myself, and two little feet running through a summer wheat field? When I next go pee, will there be blood on the toilet paper?

By the time I’d had my third transfer, I realized why these feelings felt familiar. The academic job hunt. The parallels were too funny not to be painful: I’d been on the job market for as long as I was trying to conceive. I was getting chances—on the fertility front, I had won the lottery of keeping health insurance in my home country, which partially covered IVF for everyone, unlike the UK, and I had enough savings to pay up the extra expenses. On the job front, I was applying selectively, to about four or five jobs a year, and was invited to interview almost every time. (Having a prestigious university on your CV will do that; a friend who was on her 98th unsuccessful application called it ‘the Oxford curse’—you’re invited just so that the committee can use you as benchmark—‘Say what you want but our guy definitely wasn’t any worse than that girl from Oxford!’)

Preparing for the interview/oocyte retrieval takes about two weeks of your time and all of your energy. You need to stay fit and healthy, you

need to plan your way there and back, you need to give it your best and hope it works out. You need to know you're ready for it, you should be able to visualize yourself in your new life, but you shouldn't get your hopes up—the odds are against you. At my age, I had about a 30% chance of a single IVF cycle resulting in a live birth. There were usually four candidates in the interview mix. One in four doesn't sound that bad—most of us academics will have regularly received scholarships, journal acceptances, book contracts with odds lower than that—but somehow, with each new try, beating these odds looks increasingly impossible.

And then there was of course the two-week wait until you get the negative result. We regret to inform you: you failed again.

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Maybe I got it wrong and IVF is not hell. Maybe it's purgatory, and so is the academic job search. I know too little about Christianity to know how to get out of purgatory but I do know that there are only two ways out of fertility struggles and academic precarity: you succeed, or you give up.

Success is obvious. Sure, it brings with it its own, new challenges, but they're something you wanted for so long. Giving up, though... There's giving up, and there's giving up. One is a trick you play on your mind, the other is acceptance of loss, forever. Regardless of your own feelings, you can tell where in the process of giving up other people think you should be by their reactions:

'Don't worry, the next one will work out!'

'You still have time, right?'

'It's because you want it too much. It will come when you stop trying so hard'.

'Why don't you just let it go for a while and focus on what you have going on now?'

'Maybe it's time to think about other options'.

* * * * *

By the time I had gotten my permanent academic job and gotten pregnant (not in this order), I had given up on both. I never made my peace with being childless, far from it, but I was certain the third cycle

was failing and I needed to consider the 'other options' I had dreaded for so long: oocyte donation, sperm donation, adoption. Giving up on academia was, in the end, more straightforward. I stopped sending out applications when I got pregnant—I even withdrew, with a light heart, from an interview because I didn't want to risk the stress of the preparation affecting the foetus. Later, when my son was seven months, I made one exception. A department I always wanted to work at opened a position, I sent out feelers and applied. Well, rage-applied, to be precise. The day of the deadline, I got up in the middle of the night and furiously typed up a bulleted cover letter. You want to see how I match your 'further particulars'? PhD—check, publications—over twenty, see my CV, check, funding—a ton of money and a prestigious fellowship, see CV, check, check, good-bye and up yours for not shortlisting me in your last three searches.

To my surprise, I got an interview, which turned out to be a slapstick comedy disaster. To start with, the interview notice was two weeks. This had always seemed rude but doable to me in the past. Now on maternity leave with a baby and no childcare the only way to prepare a presentation was to work nights. On one of those nights I stood in our kitchen and thought, huh, when I put my hands on my waist like this, I feel pressure, just like I did when I was pregnant... I was cautiously optimistic but mostly too busy with child, prep, and sleep deprivation to obsess about it. And then I got the heaviest, longest period in my life, complete with back pain, and realized it must be a very early miscarriage. Which was fine because I had an interview to prepare.

I realized the department wasn't serious about hiring me the moment I stepped in the room. My slot was at 16:15 and the room was half empty. The chair half-heartedly apologized that many people had gone to 'pick up kids and such'. There was only one woman in the room apart from me and HR. I'd never been ill at ease in rooms full of men in slick suits but right there, in my post-partum body two sizes bigger than before (I had to go buy two new dresses for the occasion), knowing that my husband is doing rounds with my baby outside the building, I felt out of place. Had there been more women, I might have cracked a joke about lactation brain when my train of thoughts completely blanked in the middle of answering a question.

But the worst came the next day, during the interview. Two weeks

of night shifts and two daytrips through London with a baby who was breastfeeding like a newborn made me exhausted. Plus, the maybe-miscarriage. All my practiced answers, chiselled to perfection by years of training with the university career service, disappeared into a general feeling of discomfort. They asked easy questions, I gave comically bad answers. What would you bring to this department? ‘Oh I don’t know, the other qualitative folks you have are not... great, you know? So I’d be... better?’

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(The list of people I couldn’t stand grew commensurately with unwanted menstruations and rejection letters: 1) pregnant women on the street, 2) women who are dead sure they don’t want children, 3) friends who accidentally conceived their third child, 4) male academics who churn out big data statistics – because they get all the jobs, even if the ad is explicitly looking for a qualitative scholar.)

* * * * *

After this there are no more universities I want to apply to. The decision, on which I had been going back and forth for years, must be made. In the end, it’s unexpectedly easy. A friend who is starting a side-business as a work coach gives me a couple of free sessions. In the first one, she says, ‘I hear you think a lot about money and stability’, and makes me fill out an excel sheet of ‘financial freedom’—how much money would I need to make in order to feel secure in my life. She asks me to fill it out for every city I am toying with moving to, but I stop after Oxford.

The number at the bottom of the sheet is equal to the bottom of the full professor salary scale in the UK. I’m not even a lecturer; it would take me fifteen years, at least, to get there. If something happened to my husband, I wouldn’t be able to feed our single child on a British academic salary. We certainly shouldn’t be trying for another.

It shouldn’t have surprised me—fellow postdocs told me they were delaying having second children because they couldn’t afford it. That year, nursery costs made up 70% of median salary in the Oxford area. I knew all that; but seeing it applied to my situation, my family’s life, our future—something just clicked.

It was as if years of anticipatory grief about what it would be like to leave academia were suddenly lifted off my shoulders. The numbers didn't add up and that was that. (Is that what it must feel like to be one of those stats guys?) I made an appointment with the non-academic part of the university career service, I asked friends and old classmates for advice, I organized informational chats with people whose job paths I was looking to emulate. I studied LinkedIn to see what new kind of bullshit lingo and self-promotion genres I'd have to learn. Obviously, I was discouraged by the prospect. I had invested fifteen years of energy into perfecting a dying craft and now I needed to start all over, on par with people two years out of uni. But new beginnings can be exciting, and I allowed myself to feel somewhat optimistic: I'd do what needed to be done.

Still, when I came across the ad for my current job, I gave it a try. 'It was inevitable', said my Oxford boss when I told him I got the job, 'because you'd given up!'

* * * * *

Nonsense. I might have been relaxed in that final interview because academia was no longer my Plan A. Yes, it might have helped. I hadn't fully given up, though—otherwise I wouldn't have responded to the job ad. The academic job market is a gamble and, as long as you're reading job digests, you're in the game. I had one foot out the door, but I turned around for one last draw. It's not like I had worked my way through all five stages of grief.

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(On bad days, I find myself furtively looking forward to menopause, because that way, at least, it would be settled. No more hoping in miracles, no more mental calculations of fertile windows. No more sneak-peaks at jobs.ac.uk.)

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I'd like to think my work and infertility were unrelated but I can't be sure. By the time the third IVF cycle worked, I had been on sick leave with depression for three months, so it's tempting to assume causality.

But I hated the way other people, throughout the years, implied that my work was an (or the) impediment to successfully conceiving.

One gynaecologist leaned onto her desk, stared meaningfully in my eyes and said, in a grave voice: 'You need to decide if you really want the baby'.

Given that I was in her office begging for referral to a fertility clinic, I didn't understand.

'If you do, you need to stop working', she continued. 'If you have a child, you'll need to stop anyway, so you'd better do it now'.

I wasn't sure if I'd heard correctly. The woman across the table had (of course!) had children of her own, and yet there we were, sitting in her workplace, so what did she mean?

'At some point you need to decide what you want more, a career or a baby'.

I left her practice shaking with anger and humiliation. She hadn't given me the referral yet; I still needed her. I couldn't just yell at her, 'It's 2019!' even if I could muster the courage.

I resented that everyone assumed we were, at the time, childless because I wanted to pursue my high-flying academic career. Sure, Oxford sounded fancy, but the reality of a postdoc meant working away on the grant, alone in a drafty office, far from inspiring intellectual exchanges I imagined. (I saw them happen, from time to time, but the demands of neoliberal academia meant that they were rare.) I had always known family was my priority. In fact, I sometimes felt as if my job was just something I did to pass the time before I have children. Obviously, I wanted to do my work well and, obviously, I wanted recognition for it, but I never felt a calling to devote myself to a life of the mind. Not for one minute did I think I had to choose between a baby that might never come and a job that—well, that I might no longer have in a couple of years, but for now, it was there.

Others disagreed. 'Maybe it's not the right time for you to benefit from this program', said the head of an 'academic leadership' program I had been selected for. I told her I'd have to miss a project management workshop and a networking dinner because of IVF treatment. 'We could do the workshop on Teams for you, but the dinner is a unique opportunity. You need to be there in person... As a mother, I'm telling you: you can't have it all. Maybe you're trying to do too much? Maybe

you should do the program next year?’ (As a mother, you should realize you’re suggesting I pass on professional development opportunities because I want to have children, I laughed silently. My boss was appalled.)

‘I strongly suggest you take sick leave and stop working for a while’, said my psychiatrist before the third cycle. I’d gone to him because, during those long lockdown winter days, I woke up every morning with grand plans for papers I was going to write, and by lunchtime I needed to crawl back to bed. Anti-depressants helped a bit but not enough. Stop working? I fought the idea tooth and nail. Once lockdowns started, work was all I had, even if it looked like it didn’t love me back. I was scheduled for two conferences. I knew how reinvigorating conferences can be—and they were in-person!

But also, I didn’t trust this doctor. During our first session, he told me I needed to get in touch with my femininity. ‘After all’, he said, ‘infertility speaks to the core of what it means to be a woman for you’. I thought, oh, this is interesting, I’d never thought about it that way—I always thought it was about being a human, a person, a couple who wants children and can’t—maybe the psychiatrist is onto something, though... Until he grinned and said, ‘Because you think a lot like a man but underneath it all you’re just a little girl, emotional and all’.

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‘Apart from the sexism, what is it that shocked you about it?’ asked a friend I’d confided in. ‘Well, the sexism!’ I said. ‘Oh... you’ve been away in the West for too long’, she laughed. But needless to say, it wasn’t a joke; entire libraries have been written about how sexist biases affect the quality of medical care women receive.

Later, when I told the psychiatrist I still wasn’t feeling great, he winked at me and said: ‘I’ll give you new pills. The combo is called California sunshine, you’ll be on cloud nine in no time’. With that wink, I understood what he saw in me: a hysterical, barren housewife. Of course a career didn’t fit the picture, so how could I take his recommendations seriously?

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It was the kind, calmly competent and yes, motherly, fertility specialist who eventually convinced me sick leave would be a good idea. She didn't judge, dismiss, or patronize. All she had to do was invoke her experience: I can do another cycle next month, she said, but you look like you need some time to get your body ready.

I called my boss (he applauded and took care of admin), cancelled the conferences and took long walks every day. I focused on all the things various specialists recommended over the years: physical therapy, talking therapy, pelvic floor therapy, acupuncture, seeing friends. These days, as I am preparing for another cycle and have a permanent, full-time job, I can confirm that work wouldn't have been a practical impediment to all these activities. It is possible to schedule them in the relatively flexible work week of a full-time academic. It's not possible, however, to do the kind of focused, deep thinking our profession rewards if you're out exercising your pelvic floor three times a week. Which means work wasn't the problem; precarity was. Spending the morning on a commute to get some needles in meant I wasn't going to write the next big thing that would unlock grownups' academia for me.

Going on sick leave gave me permission to mute the ever-present tick tock of guilt and worry. I was a patient; my job was to get well. Much to my surprise, I felt very little interest in my job once I set up out-of-office replies. This wasn't a breakup with academia yet, though. It was just a time out, with comfortable thirty-two months of funding left when I felt ready for it. It certainly didn't hurt that the university and my funder were going to pay me 75% of my salary for up to ten months—I don't know if I'd have taken the leave otherwise. (Probably—lockdowns meant we had savings—but at a minimum it would have added one more thing to factor into the equation.)

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I'll say this about money: having enough of it helps when dealing with a medical condition, infertility included. Commuting on a baby-making schedule, if you have the academic two-body problem, can get costly. The treatments are expensive even if you have 'good' health insurance, and none of the complementary therapies you'll inevitably try are

covered. If you're financially insecure, as many junior academics are, take everything I've described above and project it onto an additional dimension of fear and impossibility. (Note that I said junior, not young. Tick tock.)

* * * * *

Sometimes I think of my infertility and academic work as of two unconnected rivers of mud flowing in the same direction, at the same speed. Perfectly parallel purgatories. Other times I wonder. Maybe if I'd had a job in the same town as my husband, I would have conceived spontaneously. Maybe if I didn't spend my time flying back and forth between countries, I could have gone to hormonal yoga therapy classes every week. Maybe...

On the other hand, being a postdoc, on a research-only contract, could also be helpful at times. It gave me the flexibility to focus on treatment for weeks on end. It allowed me to fly abroad where IVF was cheaper. It blessed me with a feminist boss I probably wouldn't have found in the private sector. Once I won my grant, I couldn't be fired the moment my employer found out I was trying to conceive. I had no clients who would stop working with me if I became a depressed, bitter cunt to everyone around—after all, 40% of academics in the UK suffered from depression and anxiety long before Covid.

I wish I could say I learned something from those years. I should have learned a lesson about letting go—but I didn't, because if I'd been the type to abandon goals at a point where clinging to them starts being harmful to my body or soul, I'd never have finished my PhD. I did learn about the limits of meritocracy and about how pointless hard work can be in matters of chance, including biology and 'fit with the department'. But clearly I didn't internalize that lesson very well, because I'm still ready today to inject my body full of hormones for another lottery ticket. I'm too scared to look up the likelihood of success at my age, but I'd think it must be somewhere around the 10% mark this time. One in ten, I say to myself, that's not too bad. Come on, that's like getting a European Research Council grant. Like a Marie Curie—and everyone gets one of those.

I'll take those chances.

For more on motherhood in academia, read Amisah, Franka, Julia, and Shilpa in this volume; and Emanuela Mangiarotti, 'To the Center and Back: My Journey through the Odds of a Gendered Precarity in Academia', in Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023), pp. 155–62, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.16>; Lydia Namatende-Sakwa, 'Wiping the Smudge off the Window: The Darkest Time as a Student in Europe', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 183–90, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.18>; and Vera Axyonova, 'A Journey to the "Self": From Precarity as Non-Belonging to the Search for Common Ground', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.01>

For more on job precarity and job search, read Julia and Reda in this volume; and Alexander Strelkov, 'Conversation with San Precario', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 137–42, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.14>; Mangiarotti, 'To the Center and Back'; and Mihnea Tănăsescu, 'Unlearning', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 21–30, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.03>

For more on surviving loss, read James in this volume; and Norah Kiereri, 'Who Do the Dead Belong to? Considering the (In)Visibility of Death as an Outsider in France', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 33–42, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.04> and Axyonova, 'A Journey to the "Self"'.

20. A Train to Vienna: Temporary Contracts, International Mobility and Academic Life in Austria

Julia Mourão Permoser

I

I am a Professor of Migration and Integration at the Danube University Krems, in Austria. I was born and grew up in Brazil, within a Brazilian family—no international connections up to the generation of my great-grandparents. I left my country at seventeen to study in the USA, where I did a Bachelor's in International Relations. After finishing my undergraduate studies, I moved to Austria. I came to Austria for love, to be with the man who is now my husband. Originally, I did not think of it as 'migrating'. In fact, I didn't think much at all. I just wanted to be with him, and he wanted to be with me, and so I came. I had no idea what the future held. Eventually, I married and stayed, became fluent in German, did my Master's and my PhD here, had children, and built a successful academic career. Today, I fully identify as a migrant.

If I look back at my experience as a migrant academic in Austria, my first intuition would be to say that I did not experience it as having any major impact on my career. It was very hard to build an academic career here, but my immediate impulse would be to say that this hardship derived from other factors than me being a migrant. As I sat down to write this essay, however, I realized that this initial impulse was

not entirely accurate. Some of the hardship I experienced did, in fact, relate to my being a migrant. For example, one of the factors that made it difficult for me to establish myself in Austria was the requirements that young academics be 'internationally mobile', coupled with a certain idea of what counts as international mobility (namely, only stays abroad for work that happened after attaining a PhD, as I will explain more in detail later). Another factor was the precarization of the profession as a whole, achieved through a policy of substituting permanent work contracts for short-term non-renewable contracts within institutions of higher education.

Both of these developments were part of a concerted effort to modernize and internationalize the university system, which originally consisted almost exclusively of permanent positions, and used to be very closed to outsiders, with academic posts often being given to people who had long been 'waiting' for them, without any real competition. These were the protégés of the professors, who *de facto* decided who got positions beneath them, and sometimes even influenced the decision about who would follow after they retired. Because practically all contracts were permanent, and the desire of the government to expand the university budget was limited, there were also very few openings. One had to more or less wait for a professor to retire before there would be another vacancy. All of this privileged insiders and closed off Austrian universities for foreigners. In order to break with these pernicious patterns, the Austrian legislator and the university administrators reformed the hiring rules, in a way that opened up the university, but, as mentioned, also created precarization and pressured people into becoming permanently mobile.

It is important to stress that both of these developments particularly affect women in a negative way. For women, it is generally much more difficult to be mobile than men, since they often earn less than their partners, take up most of the childcare responsibilities, and are culturally expected to be the ones who 'follow their partners', rather than the other way around. If the partner is in another branch not affected by precarization in the same way, and thus has a permanent contract, the cultural expectations are reinforced by rational decision-making. In other words, this particular path towards modernization of the academic system reinforces the structural gender imbalances

already present in our patriarchal societies.

So, the laws and hiring practices that made it possible for me to enter the Austrian academic labour market in the first place were also, paradoxically, the same ones that created huge obstacles for me along the way to settling down and getting a permanent contract. I should note that I still do not have a permanent contract. I now have a so-called §99 Professorship (note the neutralizing function of the bureaucratic language), which is a full professorship, but limited in time. Mine is for five years.

The result was a career path that, on paper, looks pretty good—I never had even a single month of unemployment, because I have always managed to find a new job before my contract ended, and I have worked in different projects and institutions. But what the paper doesn't show is that, throughout the last ten to fifteen years, I felt permanently on the verge of falling off the cliff.

In comparison to my friends who stayed in Brazil, this created a peculiar mix of privilege and precarity. In Brazil, it is possible to pass a competitive examination to become a professor at a public university (*'concurso'*) and, if successful, one enters the academic career with a permanent contract from the very beginning, employed as a public servant, with all the benefits that such a status entails. All jobs for public servants are assigned on the basis of such nation-wide standardized competitive examinations. Many of my friends and family members have been successful in passing such *concursos* and thus attained, much earlier than me, job security and stability. I believe that I would have high chances of passing such a *concurso* if I tried one. Not only am I a highly qualified academic, but also, since my earliest childhood, I have had an extraordinary talent for passing exams. Hence, the fact that I do not have a similar opportunity in Austria makes me feel disadvantaged in comparison to my Brazilian peers.

At the same time, I could also sit and watch as my friends who had their secure and stable jobs at Brazilian public universities suffered all the disadvantages of working in a public system plagued by years and years of economic duress. They spent months on end not teaching because the staff of the university were on strike, only then to have to catch up by teaching the materials of two or three semesters within one. They sometimes worked for free, or even paid some of the costs

of conducting research out of their own pockets. During the Covid pandemic, their lives were disrupted in a much more dramatic way than mine, when in Brazil the lack of funds and vaccines was coupled with suicidal (or, should we say, murderous?) public health policies. In those moments, when I looked at all the benefits that I had from being in Austria—having enough money to research and travel, teaching under excellent conditions, being able to employ research assistants, receiving my salary punctually every month, etc.—I felt enormously privileged.

But all the privilege in the world could not offset the feeling of being permanently on the verge of falling off the cliff. So, when asked to write my own ‘migrant academic narrative of precarity and resilience in the Global North’, I knew that this feeling—and the factors that led to it—is what I must write about.

II

So here it goes. This is my personal narrative of precarity and resilience:

I entered the academic market in Austria at a time of great transformations. A new law had just entered into force (*Universitätsgesetz* 2002) that completely restructured the university career. Instead of permanent positions, which were the rule before, now universities were to offer mainly temporary contracts. The main exception were full professorships, which remained permanent. In other words, between the doctorate and the full professorship there were about ten to fifteen years that a person had to bridge on the basis of temporary contracts. On top of that, people who had completed a doctorate in one university were not allowed to apply directly for a postdoc at this same university, unless the contract was third-party funded, and, if so, only for a limited amount of time, because temporary contracts could not be renewed more than once.

Given that the Austrian university system is very centralized, moving from one university to another within Austria is not easy: there are simply not enough universities one could apply to. For example, there were until recently only three universities in Austria with political science departments, namely the Universities of Vienna, Innsbruck, and Salzburg. Now there is one more, the Central European University, a private university that has recently moved from Budapest to Vienna. But

moving within Austria from one university to another would also not have been satisfactory anyway. An additional unwritten rule held that only those candidates who had spent at least one year working abroad after they had acquired their PhD could be offered a postdoc position in Austria.

All of this was meant to increase the competitiveness of Austrian academia and to make it more open and international. Those were the right goals, to be sure. Austrian universities desperately needed to be reformed. But the cost of trying to achieve the goals of internationalization and competitiveness through these particular policies was an enormous precarization of the profession, which went along with the production of frustrated, tired, embittered, and demotivated academics.

It was in this context that I made my *debut* in Austrian academic life. I came to Austria at the age of twenty-two after having lived in Brazil (seventeen years), the United States (four years) and Italy (one year). Besides, I had also spent shorter stretches of time in other parts of the world. My life had been international enough. As mentioned before, I came here to be with the man I loved, and whom I eventually married. At that moment in time, my wish was to settle down, not to move about.

Following a two-year Master's, I had the luck to get the perfect PhD position: fully financed, with a proper contract of employment including all social benefits, embedded in an exciting research group, and with very reasonable teaching responsibilities. I enjoyed my four years as a PhD student and did my best to perform excellently in all my tasks, as I always do. I published in high-ranked journals, received fantastic student evaluations, and wrote a prize-winning dissertation. My colleagues cherished me, my students respected me, my supervisor wanted to keep me. Everything seemed fine, except that I couldn't stay, or at least not very easily and not for long. According to the new rules, I could not take a postdoc position immediately after a pre-doctoral one. I was required to spend at least a year abroad (away from Austria). The only exception was in case I got a third-party funded project. Then I could stay for the duration of the project-related contract, which, however, could not be renewed. In light of these rules, and given that I did not want to go abroad (from Austria), I wrote together with colleagues a grant proposal for a third-party funded project. It was a highly competitive and well-funded grant, but we had an exciting and

innovative idea, so we got it. This bought me another two years of a working contract.

After that, I needed to leave. My contract could not be renewed, there were no other options around, and there was the unwritten rule of having to move abroad (from Austria). It was ironic that I wasn't considered international enough, despite speaking seven languages, having lived in four different countries, and having spent all my adult life outside of my country of birth. Many of my colleagues had been born and raised in Vienna or its surroundings. Many of the professors were either Austrian or came from what, for me, was 'just around the corner', for example from Germany or the north of Italy. They shared the same language with the Austrians, ate similar food, and could go visit their families on weekends. I was almost 10,000 km away from my homeland, living in a totally different culture and without any family to help—but I needed to become more international. So, I applied for a postdoc abroad (from Austria) and went to Brussels for a year. As always, living in a new country is a very enriching experience, and I do not regret my time in Brussels. But it also meant that my husband and I had to finance and care for two households and to pay the costs of moving back and forth to be able to see each other. I felt like I was paying to work.

After Brussels, I went through a couple of additional temporary contracts, but at this point in life I was more concentrated on other things because my husband and I were trying to enlarge the family, which turned out to be more difficult than we expected. When we finally got that figured out, and managed to have two beautiful daughters, I finally found the energy to write a grant proposal for a project of my own. I earned my first third-party funded grant as a PI, and it was an 'ad personam' grant that I could take anywhere I wanted. I had no supervisor, no team, no nothing. It was still a temporary contract, but it lasted four years and I could do whatever I wanted, in whichever way I wanted. This was the best thing that ever happened to me professionally, and this experience of liberty transformed who I am as a scholar (and incidentally also as a person) in more ways than I could have ever imagined. I am now a bolder, more confident, and more interesting thinker than I was just a few years ago. I have come a big step closer to becoming the scholar that I want to be. And all of that was due to one thing: autonomy. It was not pressure, not competitiveness and not the

need to perform that made me better. It was the freedom and autonomy to do what I wanted. That a simple vow of confidence could have such positive effects on a person's career development was a lesson that I learned for life, and that I seek to implement in the way I interact with my students and supervisees.

But the end was not reached, of course, and I still needed to secure my future for the time after my grant would have expired. This had two consequences. First, it made me choose to locate my grant at the University of Innsbruck, which is four hours away from my home by train. Since I had spent most of my academic life in Austria at the University of Vienna, I felt that it was strategically wise to do my postdoc elsewhere, and I found a very supportive environment in Innsbruck. Still, the commuting was strenuous and financially costly. The pandemic ended up easing my load, as I no longer had to commute and, for over two years, could work almost entirely from home. But the price to pay for this was that I could hardly profit from the institutional setting I was formally associated with, as I did not have many opportunities to engage with my colleagues in person.

The second consequence was that, just a couple of years into my project, I started applying for the next job. I applied to several positions and was shortlisted for a few, but it took some time until I finally reached the place where I am now. I have been very lucky because I got a great job in the end. But the process was not easy. As some of the readers may know, applying for a professorship is a lot of work. Besides the hours that one needs to spend writing and formatting applications, there is also very demanding mental work involved. Writing a convincing application for a professorship implies developing a plan of how one would fill that professorship with life. This, in turn, requires putting yourself mentally in the position of the person who already got the post. What would your professorship look like then? What would be your line of research? What public science activities would you initiate? What courses would you develop and teach? For each advertised job—and they are advertised in different things—in my case: Austrian Politics, European Politics, Religion and Politics, Social Inequalities, the Transformation of Democracy, Transnationalism, Migration and Integration...—you have to do this mental exercise and, in order to be really convincing, you have to *truly believe in it*. You have to believe that

this is what you want for your future (and nothing else), and that this is in fact, if you think about it closely, what you have always been doing (and nothing else). You have to rewrite your academic history and reconfigure your understanding of your professional self to fit that ideal of the future.

But, of course, you do not always get the position. So, the image you have so carefully crafted of yourself falls to the ground and you are left to pick up the pieces and reconstitute it in some other way, to fit some other job advertisement. This is a tough experience. It made me feel the full weight of being in a liminal stage, without knowing what the future will bring, without being able to plan, without a clear horizon of imagination about the future.

I guess, in many ways, this is what we tend to think of as characterizing the negative side of the migrant experience. In that sense, my experiences in Austrian academia unleashed feelings similar to what we believe to be a core feature of the experience of being a migrant—at least for some types of (less privileged) migrants. This feeling of being on a liminal stage was not due to my ethnicity, or accent, or place of birth, but because of the heightened sense of uncertainty and of temporal and spatial dislocation that I experienced during the process of applying for different positions.

At this moment in time, as a way to cope with the frustration of the job application process, I started writing poems. One of them I now want to share with you. I wrote it in the train, right after finding out that I had not been selected for a job in Budapest, which I had been shortlisted for, and which I very much hoped to get. The job in Budapest would have been a permanent job in an exciting topic to work with interesting people at a very good university, so I was sad not to get it. However, just before receiving the bad news, I had received an offer for a one-year temporary full professorship in Vienna (yes, that stuff exists). This was an upgrade for me, because I had never had a full professorship before. So, all was not lost. But still, I was sad. Frustrated. Embittered. And tired, very, very tired. After all, one more version of myself was now scattered on the floor, and I was left to pick up the pieces.

When I wrote this poem, I was coming back from Innsbruck, where I worked, to Vienna, where I lived. Coincidentally, while I was writing,

the train stopped along the way to separate in two, because some of the wagons were destined to Vienna while others were destined to Budapest.

As it turned out, the temporary professorship was very good for my career and possibly decisive for me getting the job I currently have, and which I am very happy about. But the 'migrant experience' of dislocation is now part of my life history in a way in which, ironically, despite all my moving around, it had never been before. The poem below is a reflection of that moment.

III

Train to Vienna

The train has stopped
my nose is red
my eyes are swollen.

The train has stopped
but another one passes by
in the other direction.

The plants on the side
of the railroad
are green.

There are hardly any flowers
among the plants
on the side of the railroad.

The train starts moving again
and I realize
that it is moving backwards.

Or am I the one
who is sitting
with the back to the front?

Facing the past
instead of facing the future?

Green everywhere outside now,
and mountains
houses
and cows.

How beautiful is the world out there.
And yet, I am stuck inside
windows closed
doors closed
no way to get out.

Some might think me lucky.
After all
I am sitting comfortably
inside.

And the train
after all
is going somewhere.

One day
it will arrive.

Who knows where?
Who knows when?

One sign says Vienna
the other says Budapest.
Apparently the wagons will be split along the way.

I just hope I do not get caught in the middle,
squashed between the wagons
with my red nose
and my swollen eyes.

There are very little flowers
among the plants
on the side of the railroad.

For more on job precarity and job searches, read Anonyma and Reda in this volume; and Alexander Strelkov, 'Conversation with San Precario', in Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2023), pp. 137–42, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.14>; Emanuela Mangiarotti, 'To the Center and Back: My Journey through the Odds of a Gendered Precarity in Academia', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 155–62, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.16>; and Mihnea Tănăsescu, 'Unlearning', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 21–30, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.03>

For more on motherhood in academia, read Anonyma, Amisah, Franka, and Shilpa in this volume; and Mangiarotti, 'To the Center and Back'; Lydia Namatende-Sakwa, 'Wiping the Smudge off the Window: The Darkest Time as a Student in Europe', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 183–90, <https://doi.org/10.11647/obp.0331.18>; and Vera Axyonova, 'A Journey to the "Self": From Precarity as Non-Belonging to the Search for Common Ground', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.01>

For more on academic mobility requirement, read Nur, Reda, and Xin in this volume; and Maryna Shevtsova, 'Eighty Dates around the World: On Gender, Academic Mobility, and Reproductive Pressure', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 71–81, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.08> and Olga Burlyuk, 'A Smart Hot Russian Girl from Odessa: When Gender Meets Ethnicity in Academia', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 163–80, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.17>

For more by scholars from South America, read Diana, Gustavo, and Julio in this volume; and Atamhi Cawayu, 'A Letter to Future Adoptee Researchers: On Being a Researcher of Color in Belgium', in Burlyuk and Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives*, pp. 191–200, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331.19>

21. From Invalidation to Precarity: A Story of an Upgrade

Nadine Hassouneh

On 7 March 2022, I walked into the Finnish Embassy in London, and for the first time ever, I was ordered neither to pass through a metal detector nor to leave my belongings in a small locker by the entrance to an outsourced visa centre or a highly walled heavily guarded embassy. By the entrance, there was a *vetrina* with colourful items that I later learned was something called *äitiyspakkaus*; a maternity or baby box provided by the state to those who deliver. There was no sign of the usual gendarmerie or security personnel dressed in dark-coloured uniform. There was equally no feeling that I had arrived at a Schengen border before physically landing in one. I continued walking, thinking that I would be checked, but maybe farther inside. Who knows, maybe people are not expected to wait by the entrance, given the cold weather in London. Not that it would make sense to keep people waiting under the scorching sun or the equally if not more cold weather in Amman where my experiences with/at embassies and visa centres materialized and traumatized. To my surprise, no checks were performed, and the whole application process went smoother than planning a trip to Beirut or Cairo, where I need no visas. To add to my surprise, I was handed a booklet titled 'Welcome to Finland' even before getting a decision on my work permit application. Was that the renowned Finnish efficiency or was it just a 'Western' embassy based in a 'Western' country mostly serving 'civilized Western' clients if compared to the many 'Western' embassies based in the 'east' serving the 'uncivilized' clients dying to reach the 'West'? I wondered.

The second I stepped out of the embassy, I recorded a voice note to my friend Bara'a and said: 'I would like to share the experience of going to an embassy in a "Western" country versus going to one in an Arab country. I really don't know what to say, but YOU ARE NOT CHECKED! Not required to get almost naked! They don't force you to leave your mobile phone and bag outside, to take off your jacket, to take off your underwear (sarcastically)! They don't tell you anything! You enter as if you are entering any other place, easier even! And they were nice! I am shocked by the differences in getting into and out of an embassy. Astaghfirullah Al Azeem (An Arabic phrase which literally translates to I seek forgiveness from God, and is used on various occasions, including anger. In that case, I was using it to stop myself from swearing, obscenely on the streets of London, where the probability of an Arabic speaking person being around me was very high). Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. I really hope they don't change. Astaghfirullah for any previous experience I had in any embassy or immigration office. I mean, I am happy that the process passed smoothly, but at the same time, I am furious at all the previous injustices'. She immediately replied saying something on the lines of she was not sure whether the shared experience—given how exceptional it is for people from some regions of the world—should induce pleasant feelings or bad ones, and concluded that it induced bad feelings in her, ones equivalent to poisoning the body, or سمة بدن as we say in Arabic.

Being treated as a valid human outside or inside an embassy or its outsourced provider (or any border control) was not something I had experienced before. I would have expected such an experience to induce contentment. Instead, it was quite disturbing. At 05:05 UK time, less than one day after my embassy appointment, I got an email informing me that my application had been received and was being processed by the authorities, followed by another, sixteen minutes later, at 05:21, informing me that a decision on my application had been made. If the visit to the embassy trembled my being, the unexpected and unprecedented swiftness of the bureaucracy resembled an earthquake to my whole existence. I had never imagined that an apparently positive experience would trigger unrecognized traumas, but it did. It brought back memories from Belgium and the UK, where I experienced academia as a student and as a member of staff, consecutively.

Although I was a migrant by definition and at multiple times, I never considered myself one. Maybe because I never sought migration. Maybe because the term in Arabic (*Mouhajer*) has an eternal connotation to it when I never had a long-enough contract to consider myself permanent in any sense. The defined termism of my existence in the 'West' was closer to the word *Moughtareb*, which reflects temporariness and denotes return, with no accurate translation into English. My MA and PhD projects in Belgium were temporary with a clearly envisioned end date (2010-2015). My postdoc project in the UK was also a temporary one with a set expiry date (2020-2022). The same applies to 'The Bad Project: Knowledge and Aid beyond the Project Economy', which I am currently working on in Finland (2022-2025) and which ironically studies the project economy that I, just like many, am a component of. Returning home has always been a matter of time not choice.

The traumas triggered by the (positive) Finnish experience and the stories of relevance to this volume that I experienced in both Belgium and the UK are vast, to say the least. Yet, in the following I will focus on the ones that had always stood out in making me feel invalidated and that also happen to not repeat experiences of authors in volume one of this series, *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe*, many of which hit home.

Before doing so, I would like to share what I mean by invalidation, because I do not want this piece to read like a narration of victimhood or an attempt to change the realities of this world. Invalidation refers to my experiences before upgrading from a nadine with a small n, to a Nadine with a capital N (there are no capital and small letters in Arabic, so my name in Arabic was always the same. And it always felt equal. Let alone that I did not have to apply for visas to enter fortresses in Arabic). It is what I felt and was made to feel, sometimes overtly and sometimes covertly, to and in the 'West'. It is the deprivation of validity because of things that I did not choose; my passport, eye colour, skin shade, accent, and whatever else pops in the infinite list of (b)othering.

Project Belgium (2010-2015)

One day during my MA year at a university in Brussels, I was sitting minding my own business in a small seminar room chatting with

a friend back home via the ancient MSN messenger when a perilous character came in for an unplanned and undesired chat. It revolved around pondering whether to pursue a PhD or not and what topics I had in mind. 'Why do you always research the Middle East? Why don't you research the US or Europe?' the potential PhD supervisor dismissively asked. Ironically, this question came from someone who was very keen on critiquing international development, advocating for the marginalized, and very much into Said, Bhabha, Bourdieu, and others. I am not sure how all those would feel about their fan base had they heard this strike of genius. Back then, the nadine with a small n, naively replied, 'the US and Europe have enough people to research them from within'. The current me with the capital N mocks herself whenever she remembers that story. If I am asked this question now my answer would probably be different, that is if I answer. A hand gesture involving a finger will likely be my non-verbal response.

The question and its tone irked me, especially that it came shortly after a classmate had criticized my European friend for *always walking with that Muslim with the headscarf*. I wasn't sure what irritated me more; devaluing my interest in researching the 'Middle East', whatever the Middle East is, or being reduced to a nameless Muslim-being with a scarf around her head. Probably the former, because that still irritates me now. Muslim-being with a scarf? Eh... whatever. I can always decide to change my style and cover my head with a hoodie, a bandana, or better, a balaclava, but I cannot as easily efface my interest in researching a topic.

A few months later, I decided to do a PhD and decided to stick with the dismissed 'Middle East' (not with the potential supervisor who dismissed my interest in it, needless to say). I chose to study the political mobilization of the Palestinian diaspora. In some months, I was standing in front of faculty members and fellow PhD students, presenting my proposal in a room right next to the one where my interest in the 'Middle East' was dismissed. I had attended previous seminars and saw how other 'northern/western' students were praised and hailed for wanting to study the 'south/east.' Great, I thought. That must be a supportive environment. The thought did not last long. I was grilled (beyond well done) by a couple of lecturers who questioned my positionality and neutrality towards studying 'my own people'. One of whom was that one who shall not be named, mentioned above.

In my small n state of consciousness, I thought, ‘my own people? Do they even know that my father is of Palestinian origins? Or are those people “mine” because I happen to come from that same neighbourhood labelled the “Middle East”? Are they “mine” because we read the same language and speak various dialects of it? Plus, who are they to dictate who is mine and who I am anyway? Why can other colleagues research whoever and whatever they wish without their neutralities being subjected to questioning? Doesn’t it make more sense to question the positionalities of those researching “others” more than those stubbornly perceived as, and sometimes accused of, researching “their own”? What is this twisted logic?’ Those were all questions that were firing in my small n’s mind as I left the university on that dreadful day in full ‘Middle Eastern’ rage (to continue with the stereotyping). I couldn’t comprehend what had happened, why it happened, and how I was supposed to react to all that happened except by swearing mostly to myself in Arabic, but also in English with non-Arabic speaking friends. It took me months to slowly start absorbing the experience, all while trying (and not necessarily succeeding) to find an encompassing label to describe it. The small n in me couldn’t find an answer, and I subconsciously decided to continue moving forward.

The next time I had to present, a colleague, one of those who does not get to be subjected to neutrality and positionality questioning, and who had witnessed the scene (and the rage), got me a t-shirt from a trip back to the US saying ‘I am right, you’re [sic] wrong, any questions?’ and dared me to wear it on the day of the presentation. And I did. Of course. Following that incident, I was not only ‘the one from the Middle East studying her own people’, but I also became ‘the crazy one from the Middle East studying her own people’. To be honest, it was and still is one of my proudest small n moments in Project Belgium.

In my last year of the PhD, I woke up before dawn and headed to the Brussels commune at around 5:00 a.m. to renew my last yearly residence permit in Belgium. Two other commune *connoisseurs* were waiting outside the building in the chilly morning three hours before the doors officially opened. By 7:45, the doors to heaven started to slowly unlock and employees were making their way into the building through the same entrance but via another door. I managed to get ticket number three and thought that within a maximum of one hour I will be out of there

for the very last time. I had done this four times already and I knew it all by heart including that broken fax machine (yes, they were still using those between 2010-2015, and maybe until today given how useful those are in causing delays and humiliations), the lost papers (that disappear into some void), and civil servants hanging up the phone in my face if I attempt to call and ask about the status of my permit which I had been waiting for, paperless, for over three months.

After two rounds of drinking coffee and tea, running to grab as many biscuits as possible from the trolley that features behind the staff counters, scrolling through Facebook posts, liking and commenting, the employees at the commune started their day with ticket number one. It took three more hours for ticket number three to be called. I was standing there, communicating with the employee in French to show some (undeserved) respect, well prepared for any paper requirement and with the usual passport photos in hand when the employee asked me about the paper from my Imam.

‘What paper?’ I asked. ‘The paper that proves that you are wearing the headscarf for religious reasons’, she answered. ‘What is that paper and since when is it a requirement? It is the first time I am asked for it’, I said. ‘Well, you can go to the photobooth down there and take a photo without your hijab and I will process your papers right away’, she shamelessly uttered. By that moment, my subconscious probably had only two ways to digest her words; either freeze then collapse or laugh hysterically. It chose the latter, temporarily. I asked her whether she was serious, and she told me that yes, I need to bring a paper from my Imam or take a photo without the headscarf. ‘What Imam?’ I asked. ‘Your Imam’, she said. However, I was never aware that I had an Imam. Twelve years of religion lessons at school and the teachers failed to mention that every Muslim had an Imam, what a shame! I went out searching for my Imam who never existed and never will (unless I decide to marry one). I walked around the neighbourhood profiling Muslim locals who would know where the mosques that do not look like mosques are. Despite their help, I couldn’t find my Imam at the two mosques I was directed to because they were not open for prayers at that time of the day. I went back to my flat, had a nervous breakdown, cried my eyes out all day long and decided to later, one day and at some point, after my collapse, go to the main mosque (that looks like a mosque but does not sound like

one) to search for my Imam whom I will be meeting for the very first time in my life. Some days later, I *Assalamu Alaykom*-ed my way into the mosque, found the Imam, and was given the paper that will open the commune's gate to heaven (read: hell). Of course, that only happened after bitching to my Belgian Imam about such arbitrary requests (*Astaghfirullah* for bitching inside a mosque and in front of *my* Imam. I am going to hell. I probably went to hell a few days later). I went back to the commune a few days afterwards, queued while it was still dark with my eyes burning from sleepiness and the chilly weather. I had wanted to return to them dressed like Whoopi Goldberg in *Sister Act*, the movie, but decided that finishing that goddamn PhD was more important than testing such a hypothesis and making such a statement. I rarely regret anything, but I do regret not pulling a Deloris (a badass nun character played by Whoopi Goldberg in *Sister Act*). Now I am dreaming of a similar opportunity where I can pull a Sister Michael (another badass nun character from the *Derry Girls* series). Anyhow, the usual dynamics of tea, biscuit, etc. recurred except that when my number was called, I was served by another civil servant who did not ask for the paper from my Imam. I am still not sure which experience was worse; being asked for the goddamn paper or not being asked for the goddamn paper.

Project UK (2020-2022)

In 2020, after about four years of working at INGOs in Jordan, I decided to switch back to academia because I realized that thorough research is what I enjoy doing most, or maybe what I dislike doing the least. I started filling an application that a friend had shared and under 'Supporting Statements' and 'Essential to the Job' on the form I was asked to provide 'Demonstrable fluency in Arabic'. I had no idea how one can demonstrate fluency in Arabic if one is born and raised in an Arab country to Arabic speaking parents, and to add insult to injury demonstrate it by filling an empty box. Were they expecting *Arabic level B1 please see attached certificate?* Anyway, I abruptly replied to that question with attitude because the absurdity of the request was just too appetite blocking, 'Born and raised in Jordan, Arabic is my mother tongue and is an important source of my knowledge on the region'. I do recall answering with attitude, but I had forgotten that I mentioned the

language as an important source of knowledge until I searched for the application form to include some of its sections in this text. Good job, small n. Not bad!

Another 'Essential to the Job' and equally colonial question was to prove my 'ability and willingness to travel to, live and work in [Arab country one] and [Arab country two] in order to conduct fieldwork'. What the hell, I thought. So, was this application form prepared for someone who does not already live abroad (as in does not live in the UK, the centre of the world)? Is that the default for research positions focusing on the 'Middle East'? Whether this 'Essential to the Job' question was a reflection of deliberate epistemic hierarchy, institutional and personal ignorance, or just an unrevised dusty default setting of research design, or all and more in one, is a question I do not really have the desire to waste my neurons on to find an answer to anymore. I would rather count bathroom tiles. For real. There are seriously more pressing (and answerable) questions in my life, like what will I eat for dinner tonight and what will I have for lunch tomorrow.

Anyway, I did make the mistake of sending that anger inducing form and officially applying for the job. Yet, having applied for a post of research fellow to focus on investigating topics pertaining to two countries with Arabic as the main and official language, my Arabic language skills were not tested at all and my full knowledge of written Arabic and particular formats of spoken dialects was not even a requirement, not that those interviewing me would have been able to test my linguistic abilities of a language they do not read/speak/write. But still. What if someone claims they know a language? How will the panel members know? What laughing-stock material this all is.

I got the job, but for two years my small n self couldn't stop thinking, 'So, oral Arabic? Is that really what employers prefer and desire, and sometimes require? Arabs do not produce written knowledge? No? But what does that mean?' Of course, here I was not questioning whether this is done intentionally or not, because the answer wouldn't have changed anything. But which oral version of them? Don't those contexts produce any written knowledge of their own? Don't those people speak multiple and sometimes very different dialects? Don't the people living the reality of the contexts express themselves in writing in one place or another, online or offline? Well, we do. Now whether they care to, know how, or

want to access it, understand it, analyse it, or use it is not on my priority list of things to fix—practically, the winking bathroom (again) light bulb is more of a priority. Am I the privileged one who thinks that I need to interview people using my subordinate local researcher/translator to obtain trustable knowledge? Am I the privileged one who thinks no knowledge shall be or is produced without my ‘intellectual’ questions and interviewing skills? Am I the one still seeing the majority world as part of my own far yet near theoretical and empirical colonies? Am I the one thinking that certain dominant languages, but not others, are trustworthy knowledge sources? Am I the ‘expert social scientist doctor of philosophy’ who thinks that her contributions to the academy will pull people out of the depths of hell and place them on heaven’s podium? No. I am not and will happily never be. Thus, fixing the light bulb and showering without the flicker will become my privilege while others deal with their own.

I later comprehended that what those job ads desire or prefer is a language for extraction (moment of truth)! It is how data can be extracted in interviews (or rather how they think data can be extracted in interviews). It means that the knowledge produced by those people without being prompted by the ‘Western’ or ‘Western’-employed academic is not even considered a source of information. Why did it take you so long, small n! Why?! How humiliating to hundreds of millions and to a diglossic language.

Thinking that it all stops at this level of *extractivism* is wishful thinking. In cases where one is really fluent in the language that the job does not test, one is expected to become a translator! For free, of course.

‘You are a snob’, I was told when I expressed that my brain was not trained to do translation and transcription. ‘What?’ I asked, thinking that I had misheard. ‘You are a snob. You think you are above doing such tasks’. In shock, I remember writing down the word and the date the word was uttered on my yellow Oxford wire-bound legal pad (made in Palestine, to make the story even better). It was only five months into my return to academia... and what a return worth a U-turn. That was not the only accusation of snobbery I received when trying to explain how translation and transcription required special skill sets and special brain wiring. To no avail, of course. How ironic given that all the qualitative data collected, and analysis conducted during that job,

heavily and badly necessitated knowledge of written and spoken Arabic as a language, and Arabic's multiple dialects and specific connotations of each. I wondered and still wonder how professional translators and linguists who spend years acquiring knowledge and skills feel about such belittlement of their jobs and about being replaced by whoever speaks the language. How unfair to professionals and how unfair to languages.

Because academia can sometimes be an infinite well, sometimes a septic one, my label-less encounters that started in 2010 were not ending, although I was slowly getting closer to finding a description to them, especially after hearing the following from a line manager: 'I know you don't like to write about methodology. I can write that methods paper on my own. I now know enough about it'. The background of the story is that I have adopted my humanitarian sector researcher and analyst remote data acquisition style and adapted it to my job as an academic researcher, and after having utilized my linguistic abilities and networks to collect solid data during a pandemic, my knowledge, acquired skills, linguistic advantage, and overall efforts were reduced to 'I can write that methods paper on my own. I now know enough about it'. 'Pardon me!!!', small n thought. How many times do I have to explain to that creature of habit (of claiming what they don't own) that it is not methodology that I don't like, but it is bluffing what otherwise would be common sense that I don't like. How many times do I have to say that it is the type of knowledge that makes its way into a methods section of many academic or non-academic outputs that I detest. That it is the many silenced forms of knowing (just like what the line manager was planning to do while writing on her own and erasing my existence), it is the many ignored voices (like mine, the collector and analyzer of the data), it is not looking beyond 'Western' understandings of methodology, that I don't like. Plus, how can someone think that they can write a 'prestigious' methods piece based on a few conversations with someone who carried out the work? I wonder how many opportunistic academics confiscated the intellect of usually disadvantaged others and claimed knowledge through publishing papers or babbling in conferences or chats.

INVALIDATION! That is the word that was stuck deep in my brain for years (very tardy moment of truth)! That is what I felt when the 'Middle East' was dismissed for not being a worthy enough field of

research in 2010 and when I was grilled about ‘researching my own people’ in 2011 or 2012. That is what I felt when a certain format of belonging was imposed on me up till 2015 and when I was accused of being a ‘snob’ for saying that my brain was not wired or trained for translations and transcriptions. Amongst many more similar incidents, that is what I continued to feel up till 2022.

Invalidation. It is not a very common word in Arabic unless in reference to legal aspects. Maybe that’s why it took me ages to retrieve it. Maybe it took me so long because I was too used to being invalidated. Maybe I was not used to being invalidated at all. Maybe it is the covert abuse hiding behind such acts of invalidation that I could not grasp in a language beyond my mother tongue. I mean, after all, verbal abuse (beyond swearing and cursing, those are easy) is not easily nor quickly processed when received in a second or third language (trust me on this one; I have unfortunate, intense experience). Anyway, whatever the reason or reasons... I found the description that fits how the recurrent experiences were making me feel. Did it stop there? Of course not. But at least by then, I was aware of what was happening! I had finally found a label! What an achievement. I finally evolved into a capital N! (Funnily enough, after some serious head-scratching, I found out that my ‘evolution’ coincided with initiating communication with the Finnish authorities in the UK and in Finland.)

In early 2022, I chose to U-turn on that particular academic experience. After all, eye-opening moments call for action. Becoming aware is a responsibility. And my responsibility towards myself and my knowledge back then was to safeguard them and distance them from abusive invalidation. Being aware that social sciences researchers, ethically and by norm, have the right to use the data they collected and analyzed even after leaving positions and institutions, I requested proof in written form. What I received back then was the epitome of invalidation, as if to give me final and solid proof that this is what it is. As if I returned to academia to close the circle and the cycle. Academia was where my experience with invalidation started, and it is where finding a description for this experience materialized.

Here goes the circle closer. The final proof was forwarded by the line manager, a performer of *intellectomy* (word invention alert(?): intellect + -ectomy as in surgical removal).

'As for data use, the project team has first use of the data [that I myself collected and analyzed using my linguistic and cultural skills as well as networks] not already in the public domain. Data use for former members of staff who left [and who did the work before leaving] is not automatic but can be granted on a case-by-case basis [one must love vagueness and monopolization, also read as manipulation]. In such contexts, as per Collaboration Agreement between university, university, and university, you would be asked to share your output 30 days ahead of submission or presentation with the Co-Investigators [Over my dead body. Soak it (the data) and drink its water, as per an oral/dialect Arabic saying, بلّيتها وإشربي ميتها].

On this final laughter (or crying) inducing note, and because there is nothing to say in the face of such advanced forms of invalidation hiding behind the 'Intellectual Property' of anyone or anything but the person who provided the intellect, I can now say that precarity is a privilege. It was something I had only realized and experienced after battling invalidation and upgrading from n to N. Or as Karolina Kluczevska puts it when sharing her own experiences with precarity, 'navigating Tajik academia showed me that precarity and privilege are two sides of the same coin' (Kluczevska, 2023, 127). After the upgrade, I feel privileged to be humanized and to be able to even contemplate precarity as a notion and a state. Hearing my colleagues exemplify their precarities by discussing funding applications, topics, and deadlines in Finnish academia is now something I can relate to. I even have a Funds and Grants excel sheet with application opening dates and deadlines for Finnish academic funders and institutes on my desktop. Not even hidden in a folder! I never had the privilege to think about potential new projects before because my brain was busy trying to understand what was happening to the person carrying it.

Whether Finland will continue to be the place where I feel humanized (and experience precarity as an upgrade) is something that time will tell. Conversations about racism and (Islamophobia) are climaxing in the country after the 2023 elections and the leaking of old messages and posts written by current members of the government. Whether the piece of fabric around my head and my dark brown eyes will set off *hatred, rage and psychological pain* to some (like Riikka Purra), or I will be called

a desert monkey openly (although I will need to learn that in Finnish first, or better not: ignorance is bliss), or whatever else, is yet to be seen. But for the time being, I upgraded to precarity and do not look forward to a downgrade. And if I am called a monkey, I shall consider it a much-needed evolutionary upgrade, although I am not sure I can survive the ‘Middle Eastern’ desert as a monkey. What were you thinking, Wille Rydman? Did you mean camel?

A week or so after writing the final draft of this chapter and before sending it to the editors for the first time, I started watching *Ramy*; an American TV series about the son of Egyptian immigrants in the USA. Episode four touched upon 9/11 and how it affected people like young Ramy. And then it hit me. My experience with invalidation started way before 2010-2015 in Belgium. It started in 2001 when I was eighteen, in Switzerland, where I was studying for a BA. I still recall, with details, that I watched the attacks on live (box) TV in the campus’s lobby surrounded by fellow classmates, some of whom were from the USA and one of whom had a close family member inside one of the towers. I remember her fears and tears very well even twenty-two years on. However, it was not my colleagues who invalidated me; it was academia with its decision-making bodies. Back then, the (usually inebriated) British English teacher decided to fail all the Arabs in class, regardless of religion or appearance (I was an unveiled desert monkey back then). I filed a complaint and saw it dismissed before deciding to pack and leave for the unknown back home.

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Afterword

Fractal Whiteness in a Violent World

Victoria Reyes

I'm writing this essay in June 2025 from my two-bedroom apartment in California, that I rent and live in with my two kids and grandma, as the state of Israel and the US continue to commit genocide against, and ethnic cleansing of, Palestinians. Most US academics stand by and either ignore or endorse such atrocities. So, too, is Sudan in the midst of a civil war and genocide, and the Democratic Republic of Congo faces increasing violence and famine. India and Pakistan recently agreed to a ceasefire after what Farrukh Saleem (2025) calls an '87-hour' war related to Kashmir. Russia continues its imperial campaign against Ukraine, eleven years after Russia invaded and annexed Crimea, and the hundreds of thousands of military and civilian lives killed continues to rise.

In the Philippines, the Senate sent back to the House articles of impeachment against Vice President Sara Duterte for corruption and plotting to assassinate the Philippine President, among other charges—what many are saying effectively killed such impeachment attempts—while her father, former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte is being held in the Netherlands by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity during his 'War on Drugs' from late 2011 to March 2019. Just the other day, Israel committed targeted assassinations of Iranian government military leaders and bombarded Iran's nuclear facilities, killing civilians and wreaking havoc in civilian areas. Iran, in response, retaliated by bombing Tel Aviv. Violence is escalating each day.

Trump tells Khamenei, the Iranian supreme leader, to unconditionally surrender—but for what? Iran was not the aggressor.

Communities within the US are not—and have never been—exempt from such violence. Recently, Democratic State Representative Melissa Hortman and her husband were assassinated, the Trump administration is deporting and disappearing political dissidents, student activists, immigrants—regardless of legal status—and US citizens, including children. Trump, with the tacit acceptance and silence of cowardly Republicans and Democrats, alongside his cronies—who until recently included the Nazi-saluting billionaire Elon Musk—are gutting federal jobs, funding for healthcare, education, welfare, aid, and programs—which has directly resulted in the death of thousands around the world—ignoring court orders, threatening and siccing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents, Marines, and the National Guard on peaceful protestors in blue (meaning Democratic) states and cities. Corrupt politicians, judges, and ‘law enforcement’ follow his lead, as Trump is merely the figurehead of what has long been a fascist state, though he has single-handedly revealed (much to the surprise of the majority of White Americans) the depths of hatred, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia on which this nation-state is built.

There is no end in sight for any of these atrocities, and so many more that evade news headlines both with and without assistance, cooperation, and support from the US Trump regime. The underlying conditions that give rise to such terror are empire and late-stage racial capitalism, with its constant drive for more profit, and the associated neoliberal ideology that focuses on individual choice, achievements, and which is rooted in White supremacy. An edited volume about migrant academics is prescient, as the figure of the ‘migrant’ and the ‘academic’ are both rooted in empire: the latter as active agents supplying their respective imperial employers (universities, colleges, and any government or non-governmental organization that produces or draws on research) and the former seeking refuge—often to an imperial core—from the continued violent attacks against their countries and/or for social mobility and pursuit of ‘quality’ higher education.

In the rest of this essay, I reflect on the broader themes of this edited volume. First, I conceptualize the lives of authors in the larger geopolitical and structural forces that shape and are shaped by their experiences.

Following this, I use the term ‘fractal Whiteness’ to understand how Whiteness as property and resource (e.g., Harris, 1993) is not a binary, and end with a meditation on how the demand for academic migrants to translate themselves in order to succeed in the profession is an act of violence.

‘How Does It Feel To Be A Problem?’

In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois shared: ‘Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question... How does it feel to be a problem?’ (Du Bois, 2014 [1903]). That is, he describes how those in this other world—that is, a world where White supremacy reigns—continually ask and demand of him, as a Northern, educated Black man, a recognition that they are on his side, so to speak, and ‘not like’ Southern White racists. His reply: ‘I answer seldom a word’ (Du Bois, 2014 [1903]). Indeed, the very premise in which these questions and comments about race are placed upon Du Bois is a fallacy, because Whiteness, White supremacy, and racism are structural problems and—for Du Bois’s specific context—are rooted in the US North, just as much as the US South. The US North was no exception to structural racism, genocidal massacres of indigenous populations, nor chattel slavery. This insight and question, among others, from *The Souls of Black Folk*, reveals the depths of anti-Black racism and the existence of a global colour line.

How does it feel to be a problem? This question, though not worded as such, continues to be asked, in varying degrees and under varied circumstances, to marginalized peoples and colonized subjects across the world. It is the very question asked—implicitly, rather than directly—and answered by each author in this edited volume. Their answers reveal how empire and practices of coloniality continue to structure the lives of precarious migrants, even those ‘academic migrants’ who are often relatively more privileged in comparison to non-academic migrants and those in their homeland. This is the case not only in the United States, the imperial core of modern higher education, but across the globe.

As Moustafa Bayoumi (2009) argues, this question of ‘what is it like to be a problem?’ is baked into experiences of being Arab in the US, post 9/11. It is also baked into the very structures and processes of immigration itself. Each of the authors in this volume discusses the

structures and processes of precarity that underlie much of immigration to countries from (former) colonies to imperial cores: from the additional layers of bureaucratic approval demanded by governments that extract additional time and labour, with each step adding layers of stress that invade the body and mind, to heightened surveillance and costs—financial, familial, and cultural. Indeed, the editors and authors in this volume reveal the *structural*, rather than the individual, causes of the varied forms of precarity they face, and the systems of oppression and domination (such as gendered racism, homophobia, and xenophobia) that underlie such conditions.

Yet a focus solely on barriers can inadvertently reinforce a deficiency-oriented framework, where ‘if only’ academic migrants had the ‘correct’ passport or ‘enough’ familial and financial resources, or the ‘right’ cultural and social capital, then they would be able to ‘successfully’ navigate the academy. The burden to strategize and find alternative means for survival is, then, placed on individuals. Alternatively, advocating for slight changes (aka reform) to the system as a means to ‘solve’ these problems—that is, implementing strategies to decrease barriers to access and increase financial, social, and cultural support, networks, and knowledge, for example—implies that at its core, the system itself is not flawed. Reforms can ‘correct’ such minor ‘anomalies’. In other words, the logics of the system itself are not flawed; rather, the biases that humans bring in implementing the system are the problem and addressing such flaws is the task at hand. Yet, the logic of capitalism—which is entwined with the logic of academia—cannot be separated from the people who create, implement, maintain, and expand capitalism’s goal of accruing more and more profit.

As such, I reject such thinking that implies reform will lead us to liberation. Reform only tightens the grasp of racial capitalism over our lives. In the rest of this essay, I want to slightly reframe the stories in this volume and follow transnational and abolitionist feminists who teach this to us. As Audre Lorde (2007 [1984]) once said: ‘*For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master’s house as their only source of support’ (112). In other words, trying to reform a system by using that very

system's rules, regulations, and pathways for change will never result in liberation. As Frederick Douglass (1857) said: 'power concedes nothing without demand. It never has and never will' (22). Transformative change demands conflict. Attempting to change through appeals to one's humanity and by pointing out inequities is futile, as power—any power—does not care about such appeals. Power and privilege *need* inequities to amass more and more—the goals and visions of neoliberal White supremacist dreams.

Fractal Whiteness

Reading the essays in this volume against the grain—that is, moving from a focus on the obstacles to highlighting what makes immigration processes smooth—reveals how Whiteness is *fractal*. That is, Whiteness-as-structure takes multiple forms and is multiscalar. In thinking about fractals, I rely on Moussawi's (2020) concept of fractal Orientalism 'as a theoretical lens, [...] an imperial structure or imposition that functions concurrently at the transnational, regional, national, and city levels' (7-8). By drawing and building upon transnational feminisms, Moussawi expands Edward Said's (1994 [1978]) foundational concept of 'Orientalism' to reveal 'a multiscalar spatial model that uncovers how distinctions are made, circulated, and remade' (Moussawi, 2020, 8, see also Yegenoglu, 1998). In other words, fractal Orientalism reminds us of the *relational* aspect of representation—that *what* and *who* is constructed as 'Other' versus 'modern' is only understood through comparisons, and occurs at multiple levels: cities, states, transnational flows. Rather than a static binary, Moussawi (2020) reveals the fluidity of representation and the urgent need to contextualize the conditions under which fractal Orientalism is employed.

In understanding what I'm calling fractal Whiteness, I use fractal Orientalism to think through the ways in which Whiteness—as a structure—allows access to resources precisely because it is differently represented and drawn upon at the transnational, regional, national, and city levels. This means that Whiteness does not adhere to a White/non-White binary. Rather, Whiteness relies on a logic of Othering that exists in nations, regions and cities, even as it replicates similar hierarchies within, among, and across Whiteness and non-Whiteness categories. In

other words, Whiteness is a spectrum and is only understood in relation to power, resources, and systems of oppression and domination. Fractal Whiteness insists on representation and practices that twists its form depending on context. Take, for example, transnational tourism. At the transnational level, Croatian tourism represents itself as culturally connected to Western Europe to gain access to the privileges of distancing itself from the 'Other'—in this case Eastern Europe—and aligning itself with the West (Rivera, 2008). As such, both fractal Orientalism and Orientalism focus material and symbolic processes involved in Othering. I build upon Said and Moussawi by combining fractal Orientalism with that of sociological theories on race, racism, and racial projects. This latter set of theories and intellectual traditions is vast and varied (e.g., see Golash-Boza, 2016 on a compressive synthesis on theories of race and racism). Nevertheless, scholars have demonstrated how race, as a concept, is rooted in colonialism and serves as both a political category and a social construction—that is, the meanings and forms of which vary across time and place and are tied to access to resources (Mills, 1997).

One definition of racism, then, is the 'state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death' (Gilmore, 2007, 28). Likewise, racial projects are 'simultaneously an interpretation, representation or explanation of racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines... Racial projects are attempts both to shape the ways in which social structures are racially signified and the ways that racial meanings are embedded in social structures' (Omi and Winant, 2015, 125).

Hence, Whiteness, for example, is both structural and ideological. That is, being White or signalling proximity and conformity to Whiteness is when a person or group aligns themselves with the dominant patterns that provide privileged access to resources, maintain the status quo, and deny those same resources to those that are 'Othered'. In other words, Whiteness means 'gaining access to a whole set of public and private privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic subsistence needs, and therefore survival. Becoming White increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one's life rather than being the object of others' domination' (Harris, 1993, 1713; for a personal narrative, see

Andrikopoulos, 2023). In other words, 'the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being White have become a valuable asset that Whites sought to protect... Whites have come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by law' (Harris, 1993, 1713). Thus, Harris (1993) argues, Whiteness is a form of property. Being tied to access to resources also means Whiteness is a form of cultural capital (Wallace, 2018; Richards, 2020; Richards et al., 2023), which Bourdieu (2010 [1984]) defines as 'familiarity with the culture of the dominant class and a mastery of the signs and emblems of distinction and taste' (137) that is a resource people can strategically use.

This means that Whiteness, and its fractals, can be acquired, since they are also strategies and practices. Fractal Whiteness, then, means that marginalized places and people, too, can draw on symbolic meanings and ways of 'being' White. This is done in order to conform—or present themselves as adhering—to varied aspects of Whiteness to lessen the impact of racism in the everyday and/or in attempts at belonging. This often takes the form of varied ways to 'pass' as White—even as passing comes with losses—and/or as having legal status, an assumption of belonging held by White people in the US (e.g., Hobbs, 2014; García, 2019). It may also take the forms of what Neda Maghbouleh (2017) calls 'racial hinges' or 'how the geographic, political, and pseudoscientific specter of a racially liminal group, like Iranians, can be marshaled by a variety of legal and extralegal actors into a symbolic hinge that opens or closes the door to Whiteness as necessary' (5) or 'racial loopholes', which 'describes the everyday contradictions and conflicts that emerge when a group's legal racial categorization is inconsistent with its on-the-ground experience of racialization or deracialization' (5). Whiteness is neither static nor consistent. Since Whiteness is material and symbolic, rooted in empire, and constitutive of systems of oppression and domination, it also forms both the basis of modern forms of legitimate knowledge production and what Erving Goffman (1959) calls presentation of self in everyday life. That is, Whiteness, and its fractals, consists of certain practices ranging from how to conduct legitimate research and whose knowledge counts, as well as ways of dressing, speaking, and considerations of beauty.

Following this, and in reading against, across, and through this

volume, I suggest that authors of the essays reveal three avenues in which fractal Whiteness operates: through epistemology, embodiment and affect, and silence.

Epistemology

Scholars and public intellectuals have long critiqued the academy as not only prizing Western epistemologies over so-called ‘Eastern’ or ‘Other’ forms of knowledge production, but as gatekeeping Western epistemologies as *the* legitimate source of knowledge production (e.g., Spivak, 1988). This is the case even for feminist scholars (e.g., Lâm, 1994; Mohanty, 1988), who reproduce the status quo by co-opting radical language and failing to align their practices with their rhetoric (e.g., Moussawi and Reyes, 2024).

The many ways that non-Western epistemologies are devalued and Western ones are held as the legitimate standard lies in the processes in which research is conceptualized, performed, and evaluated, as Aida A. Hozić discusses in her essay. This ranges not only from English as the dominate language of academia world-wide—where non-English scholarship is often only legible when translated into English—but also to how Western publication outlets are overvalued while publication outlets stemming from non-Western places are dismissed as neither credible nor legitimate. As such, epistemically, Whiteness shapes intellectual genealogies. That is, in order to be ‘successful’ and legitimate, scholars from the global south must engage with Western scholarship—thus think, write, and theorize in English using Western theories for English language audiences, as Ahmed Abozaid writes in this edited volume. In other words, drawing and building on White epistemologies provides relatively more privilege, legitimacy, and access to material and symbolic resources, regardless of a given work’s substantive content, as long as the research itself (from how the research question is asked to how data is collected and analyzed, how scholarly texts are written, and citation practices, among others) conforms to disciplinary norms and standards and does not challenge underlying methodological and epistemological assumptions. Not doing so, then, closes access to such resources.

Embodiment and Affect of Migrant Academics

Migrant academics and the precarities faced under systems of oppression and domination are also embodied. That's because, as the anonymous Palestinian author of 'Despotic Devices; Yet Another Form' notes, 'migration is displacement', and this displacement is both felt and experienced in the everyday. How does this relate to fractal Whiteness? Through 'professionalism' and respectability politics—which Higginbotham (1994) describes as a strategy of resilience that 'emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations' (187)—that 'reflect[s] and reinforce[s] the hegemonic values of White America' (187).¹ In other words, practicing White norms of professionalism, for example through performing White bodily aesthetics and beauty work such as clothing choice, hair style, and/or accessories, among other practices, opens up doorways that may otherwise be closed (for beauty as Whiteness, see Cottom, 2019; on beauty work, see Kwan and Trautner, 2009). This even includes *how* people speak English, as even types of accents and dialects are differentially racialized and tied to access to resources (e.g., Crump, 2014; Alim, Rickford, and Ball, 2016).

However, doing so does not grant migrant academics full inclusion into the academy. Their academic conditional citizenship (Reyes, 2020) is incumbent on the ways in which they are able to adhere to fractals of Whiteness, as universities and colleges are White and masculine spaces containing histories of violence and empire, and thus those with feminine and racialized bodies are 'space invaders', disrupting governing norms (e.g., Puwar, 2004). Fractal Whiteness also allows us to see how and why the passport is symbolically tied to embodiment. For example, whereas a blue US passport—prior to Trump 2.0—carries with it untold privilege through the ease in which US passport holders may cross international borders, a passport from Nigeria, for example as

1 Although the women in the Black Baptist church that Higginbotham wrote about emphasized respectability politics as a strategy of resilience, they also combined such politics with 'traditional forms of protest, such as petitions, boycotts, and verbal appeals to justice...[as such, the women's movement also] simultaneously subverted and transformed the logic of race and gender subordination' (Higginbotham, 1994. 187).

Babátúndé Fágbàyíḃó discusses in this edited volume, is tied to the body of the person carrying it, and thus, subject to suspicion and scrutiny.

Silence

If to complain about a problem is to be seen and treated as the problem (Ahmed, 2021; for a personal account, see Aizada Arystanbek's essay in this volume), then what Whiteness demands is silence and agreement, tacit or otherwise. Fractal Whiteness is operating when such an agreement or silence is present. The conditionality of inclusion is predicated on this. This is particularly the case when silence concerns the very existence of a people, as in the case of Palestinians, where even the mere mention of Palestinian life and culture, as well as speaking out against genocide, comes with very real and material consequences. This is not to implicate all who remain silent. As Xin Pan writes in her essay, there is much for scholars in and of the global north to learn from those in and from the global south about how to operate in the shadows, cracks, and peripheries of authoritarian regimes. Knowledge that continues to be disregarded, erased. Instead, an adherence to not 'rocking the boat' and acceptance of the status quo allows racialized, gendered, sexualized, and otherwise 'Othered' bodies to be closer to the privileges of Whiteness. This includes those scholars of colour who advocate for 'diversity, equity, and inclusion' while simultaneously gatekeeping the profession through enforcing professional norms and research standards rooted in Whiteness and empire (e.g., Moussawi and Reyes, 2024). Indeed, there are professional consequences that come with refusing silence, and complaining (Ahmed, 2021).

Abolition as Disrupting Translation

Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of Oxford Translators' Revolution is a fantasy book by R. F. Kuang set in Oxford. Told through the perspective of Robin Swift, a Chinese boy who is 'rescued' from death and poverty by a Professor Lovell (a White man), the book follows Swift as he enrolls as a student in Oxford University's Royal Institute of Translation, aka Babel. Through his studies, he uncovers the central role of translation in not only maintaining the Royal Institute, but also as the

glue holding together the British empire. The book is a scathing critique that reveals how practicalities and logistics of empire—for example, trade negotiations—depend on translation. Indeed, the book's tagline is 'an act of translation is always an act of betrayal' and thus violence.

Kuang's work is specifically on the science and art of linguistic translations; yet, to translate is to make something accessible—more legible to audiences for which the writing was not intended. As such, translation is not limited to speech or text. Using this broader definition of translation, we can understand how academic migrants are often forced to translate, not only their words to English, but also their very thoughts and bodies. This type of violence is constitutive of academia, as Diana Zacca Thomaz writes in this edited volume. To not subject yourself to the violent potential of translation and to not (be able) to draw on fractal Whiteness is to be rejected and dismissed. Any reimagining of the academy must rely on abolition, or the destruction of the existing system built on violences, large and small, followed by the reimagining and creation of a more just and liberatory future.

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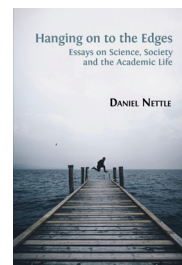


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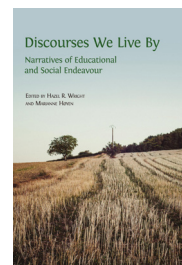


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FROM THE MARGINS MIGRANT ACADEMICS' NARRATIVES OF PRECARIITY

EDITED BY LADAN RAHBARI AND OLGA BURLYUK

Innovative in both form and concept, this book blends storytelling and analysis to illuminate the everyday realities of academic migration. Through authentic and creative narratives, it continues the dialogue begun in the editors' previous volume, expands a growing community of voices reflecting on what it means to be a migrant academic today, and offers a timely and insightful contribution to how we understand mobility in academia.

Dr Toma Pustelnikovaite, Cardiff University

This is the much-anticipated second volume following *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe* published in 2023 by OBP. This new collection deepens and expands the conversation on the lived experiences of migrant academics navigating global academia. Maintaining the autoethnographic and narrative approach of the first volume, *From the Margins* brings together diverse voices that challenge the Eurocentric framing of academic mobility by extending the focus beyond Europe to contexts such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, South Africa, and the Middle East.

Through deeply personal, creative, and reflexive narratives, the contributors delve deep into the notions of privilege, migration, and precarity, revealing how academic hierarchies and colonial legacies shape everyday experiences of belonging, vulnerability, and resilience. Bridging scholarship and storytelling, this volume offers an intellectually rich and emotionally resonant exploration of academia's margins, inviting readers to rethink what knowledge, care, and solidarity mean within and beyond institutional borders.

This volume appeals to scholars and students across migration, sociology, postcolonial, gender, race, and border studies, as well as to university leaders and diversity officers. Its interdisciplinary and creative format—including poetry and prose—makes it both accessible and engaging for academic and general audiences alike.

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